**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 31, Part 2**

**Episodes 4006–4045 (S31 total: 3861–4045)**

**Episode 4006**

**Greyson**

Cesaries’s words were a shock. The insinuation was obvious, and Cali immediately picked it up.

“Wait.” Cali stared at the councilor, chuckling awkwardly. *Incredulously*. “So the Samara Luna ceremony was your idea?”

Cesaries smiled. “Well, I was the one who suggested they perform it here, but Xavier was definitely already considering Ava for his Luna. He’s the new Alpha of the Samaras, and she’s both a Samara legacy and his mate. It makes perfect sense.”

Cali’s awkwardness vanished, replaced with a glare. She reminded me of an angry cat, only far more dangerous. Mainly because Cali had an energy sword that could slice people in half; although I knew she’d never use it on Cesaries.

Far more concerning to me was the fact that she was *this* angry at Cesaries on Xavier’s behalf. It was making me jealous of her jealousy—and wasn’t that just fucking fantastic?

It made sense, though. Cali couldn’t just switch her feelings off. Xavier was a gigantic asshole, but he was also her mate—of course she was angry at the idea that he’d been coerced into a Luna ceremony.

But as much I tried to reason through my jealousy, the little green monster inside ignored me, desperate to wring Xavier’s neck.

A good time overall.

“Ah, I see what this is,” Cesaries said, breaking the silence that had fallen between the three of us. “I’m sorry, I keep forgetting about your *due destini* situation. But of course, it’s resolved now, isn’t it?” He glanced at me. “After all, you and Greyson are Alpha and Luna, and now Xavier has his own Luna in Ava. It’s all very clear-cut, is it not?”

Our situation would only become clear-cut once the universe stopped acting like it was getting paid to fuck with us, which I didn’t see happening anytime soon.

Cali, meanwhile, was frowning at Cesaries’s words, and for a wild moment, I was sure she was about to blurt out that her Luna mark was fake.

“Sure,” I said quickly, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “But it’s always difficult to accept change. We’ll have to take some time to get used to it.”

Cesaries smiled. “Of course, of course. But maybe by the next summit, you’ll have a few little werewolves running around, hmm?”

I almost choked. Yes, I wanted to have a couple of mini Calis running around at some point in the future, but children were literally the last thing any of us needed right now. And the last person I wanted *suggesting* it to me was Cesaries.

Before I could say something to get him off that topic, Cesaries was called away—thank fuck. I turned to Cali, trying not to wince when I saw her dark expression.

*You okay?* I mind linked. *Sorry about Cesaries. And, well, everything.*

She glanced up at me, and her expression smoothed out. Sighing, she shook her head. *Sorry. I overreacted. It shouldn’t matter to me who made the decision to hold the Luna ceremony. It’s done*. *Plus, Cesaries is right.*

“About what?” I whispered.

“The ceremony was the natural next step for the Samara pack,” Cali admitted, pressing her lips together. She looked away, taking a deep breath.

Despite my idiotic jealousy, her pain made me ache. I wished so badly that I could make it all go away.

Swallowing hard, I reached for her hand. “Let’s head back, okay?”

She nodded, holding my hand as we walked back toward the Redwood camp. Before the silence between us could turn awkward, Jay and Lola raced up to us.

“God, what now?” Cali muttered.

A second later, Lola was grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her. “The Bitterfangs attacked!”

Fucking hell.

“What happened?” I asked.

Jay led us over to his and Lola’s tent. “They attacked our tents—sliced right through them.”

“And then one of them pretty much threatened to kill me,” Lola said, her eyes flashing with fury.

“What?” Cali asked. “Why would they do that?”

Lola scowled. “They seem to not like that I’m a vampire-werewolf hybrid. Or that was just a convenient excuse.”

The fact that the Bitterfangs had done this tonight meant that their disrespect could only escalate—just like my fury. But I grabbed hold of the emotion and put it in a cage. I hadn’t killed Malakai when he’d attacked my mother—I was *not* going to lose it over some damn tents. I refused.

“Lola’s right. They’re merely looking for an excuse to move against the Redwood pack,” I said. “They’re really pushing things now that the summit is almost over.”

“Maybe it’s the Wolf Moon making them agitated,” Cali suggested nervously.

“They were making moves against us long before the Wolf Moon,” I said, turning to Jay and Lola. “Go clean up what you can and let the others know what happened, if they don’t know already.”

Lola and Jay nodded before running off. Just then, Mace arrived at camp, making a beeline for Cali and me.

“A bunch of Bitterfang assholes slashed up our tents,” he said darkly.

Fuck.

“They got ours, too,” I said.

“Do you think everyone in the alliance was hit?” Cali asked, glancing between Mace and me.

“I wouldn’t put it past Malakai,” I said, gritting my teeth.

And then, just because my mood was destined to get even worse, I spotted my brother striding toward us with his new Luna in tow. I glanced at Cali—these two were the last people I wanted Cali to see right now. She’d insisted on coming along to congratulate them earlier, but I hadn’t forgotten her reaction during the Luna ceremony. She had seemed devastated. Broken.

It reminded me of my ceremony with Joss, how I’d been able to feel Cali’s jealousy and anger at the time. I could’ve sworn I’d felt it this time, too—Cali’s misery overwhelming me, her pain searing through the mate bond. Whether I liked it or not, she was still mated to my brother. No matter how much I wished it had all been in my head, something told me it hadn’t been.

“Guess we’re all here for the same reason?” Xavier asked when he arrived. “How are we going to respond?”

“We should take it to the council,” Mace said.

I snorted. Xavier scoffed. It was weird to agree with him when it felt like I was constantly one wrong word away from punching him. He hadn’t looked at Cali once, and when I glanced at her, her expression was serious. She only looked at me.

That felt good.

“What’s the council going to do about some torn-up tents?” Xavier asked Mace. “Pat us on the back and write us a condolence card?”

“If the council wanted to act on this, they would’ve done something already,” I said. “But I think at this point, we can all agree that they’re all talk. Just look at Knox’s trial.”

Mace glowered. “Then we should call the alliance together.”

“Good idea,” I said.

“Let’s recap our numbers,” Mace said.

“It’s the Redwoods, the Blue Bloods, the Samaras, the Vanguards, and now the Cobalts,” I said. “I had a good talk with the Ironwood Alpha, and I suspect that Duke from the Aspen pack would step in if things got dicey, since he’s friends with Lucian.”

“What about your buddy Dayton?” Xavier asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Dayton isn’t my buddy,” I said shortly. “He’s not out, but he’s not definitively in, either.”

“Do we think if we asked, they’d all fight with us?” Ava suddenly asked.

“There’s only one way to find out,” I said. “They know the stakes.”

Cali looked around, shaking her head. “What about the summit? Technically, it’s not over yet. The no violence rule still applies.”

“Doesn’t seem to matter,” I said. “The Bitterfangs have made their intentions clear from day one, and they’re getting bolder.”

“There’s something to be said for their fucking audacity,” Mace said.

“Exactly,” I said. “I’m not going to sit around and let them keep attacking us. It’s time to end this.”

Cali pressed her lips together, eyeing me. The concern was obvious on her face, and I waited for her protest. She hated violence—we’d talked about that time and time again. But desperate times called for desperate measures, and this had been coming for a while now. From the moment we’d helped those kids, the possibility of war with the Bitterfangs had been extremely damn high. None of this was coming as a surprise.

Besides, when Malakai had gone after my mother, he’d sealed his own death warrant. I didn’t know when or how, but one day, I’d rip his fucking throat out.

“About what Xavier said before…” Cali said his name, but she looked at me. She stared at me as if she felt I was the one in charge, and that appeased my wolf to a degree that probably wasn’t healthy. Oh, well. “Are we going to retaliate?” she asked, gulping. “We *are* still at the summit, and there are rules.”

I shook my head, taking in a breath. “We’re done following the rules. All bets are off.”

**Episode 4007**

Greyson’s words echoed through my head. This was it—the moment we’d been building toward ever since we’d found Russell bleeding in the woods. The moment I’d feared for so long. But now that it was happening, I found I wasn’t as scared as I’d predicted.

*I mean, I AM scared, but, like, not scared shitless.*

I’d been training so much lately, and we really did have a strong alliance with some good potential allies. I felt sure that some of them would join our side, knowing what was at stake. If you looked at the facts, the alternative—to try to reason with the Bitterfangs and convince them that there shouldn’t be a war—just wasn’t feasible. But we couldn’t just sit back and allow them to threaten us, either. They were a bunch of bullies, and the fact that they’d threatened Lola made me want to march right up to their camp and demand they apologize.

Bottom line, we couldn’t let them intimidate us. It just wasn’t right.

*And even if I am just a fake Luna, I still want to defend my pack.*

This would be my first real step toward becoming a real Luna. Not Xavier’s, obviously—the only person who mattered in this moment was Greyson. He believed in me. He always had.

“You’re right,” I told Greyson. “We have to fight back. We don’t have a choice.”

Nobody spoke. Greyson looked shocked, blinking at me like he wasn’t sure if I’d really just agreed to violence. But at this point, there were no other options.

*We need to protect our own*, I told him.

I could’ve sworn I saw a hint of a smile on his face before he turned away to look around the circle. “Anyone have any thoughts about our next steps?”

“We’d be in a much better position overall if we all had our full packs,” Mace said.

“That’s true,” Greyson said. “I’d hoped that the alliance might make the Bitterfangs think twice about declaring all-out war, but…”

“But they clearly don’t care,” I said. “They attacked our pack house and Greyson’s mother. This might have been a small thing with the tents, but they’re testing the waters. They aren’t deterred by the fact that we outnumber them now. We need to be ready.”

“I agree. We’ve tried our best to avoid it, but there’s a fight coming,” Mace said, giving me a nod. “And that means I want the full strength of my pack behind me.”

“It’d be better to fight on our own turf, too,” Greyson said. “If we get home before they attack, we’ll be well positioned to go on the offensive.”

I knew exactly what “going on the offensive” meant for Greyson. The image of him in battle flashed through my head—a giant silver p drenched in blood that wasn’t his own, surrounded by dead wolves.

Xavier was an amazing fighter, too, along with Rishika and Jay and Gabriel, but Greyson… There was just something else there. Something that was pure predator, and in complete contrast with how composed he usually was. When he was pushed to his limit, it was like a switch flipped in his brain, and then…

Well. It was a good thing he was on our side.

“The distance the Bitterfangs would have to travel to get to us would buy us some time at least, right?” I asked.

“Wait,” Xavier said sharply. For the first time since he’d arrived with Ava, I forced myself to look at him dead-on. My stomach throbbed, but I ignored it. “Are you guys saying that we should run back home? It’ll look like we’re retreating.”

“We won’t be retreating,” Greyson said. “We’ll just be doing the smart thing—getting our full packs together. I should be able to convince Big Mac to blip the alliance packs back to the Redwood pack house ASAP, if they all agree.”

Xavier’s jaw clenched as he crossed his arms over his chest. “I still don’t see how this *isn’t* us running away like a bunch of cowards. There are fewer Bitterfangs here—why give them any time to boost their numbers? Why not just kill Malakai here and now?”

“On summit grounds?” Greyson asked. “How do you intend to do that without a full-on battle in front of the entire werewolf elder council? Plus, there are fewer of *us* here, too. What’s your plan?”

Xavier glared at Greyson, opening his mouth to bite out a response, but then Ava spoke first. “We could poison him somehow.”

Mace arched his eyebrows at her.

“What?” she said. “It’s simple. Elegant. No fuss.”

Greyson shook his head. “He’s got food testers.”

“Well, we have to *do something*,” Xavier snapped. “We can’t just fucking leave. Your plan is bullshit.”

“I still can’t hear you suggesting a better plan, Xavier,” Greyson said, glaring.

*Oh god, here we go again*, I thought. *Round thirty million in the Greyson vs. Xavier saga…*

“The last thing we need right now is for you two to fight,” I told them both, before their argument could escalate. “We need to be united now more than ever.”

“Exactly,” Ava said. “Stop arguing with each other. The only thing that matters is figuring out a way to kill Malakai. You both agree on that much, so let’s just make a plan and stick to it.”

Ava’s gaze flicked between Xavier and Greyson, her expression serious. With a jolt, I realized that she’d actually backed me up just now. It felt wrong, the two of us being on the same page. It was weird enough that I wanted to pick a fight with her for… Well, for agreeing with me. Or had she just stolen my opinion and presented it as her own?

*Oh my god, Cali*,I scolded myself. *Stop being so petty and take your own advice! No fighting*.

“I still say that I want my full pack for this fight,” Mace said firmly, interrupting my internal ramblings. “It doesn’t matter if we kill Malakai now or later.”

“Besides, the fact that he keeps provoking us means that he wants us to attack right here and now,” Greyson said.

“And we obviously don’t fucking want to do what he wants,” Mace added.

Nodding at Mace’s words, Greyson turned to Xavier. Sharply, he said, “It’s two against one, Xavier. I’m going to confer with Lucian and the others, but you really need to start thinking about this on a larger scale.”

Xavier glared at Greyson but didn’t protest.

“I’ll go get my pack ready to leave,” Mace said.

Xavier nodded at the same time as Ava. I hated to see them so in sync, so I looked away—at Greyson. He seemed steady as a rock, and that steadied me as well.

“Let’s meet on the west side of the woods whenever you have your packs ready to go,” Greyson said. “I’ll talk to Big Mac.”

The others nodded and walked off.

*And you’re sure you can convince Big Mac to do this?* I asked Greyson.

*If she’s reluctant, I’ll find a way to make it worth her while*, he replied.

I inhaled sharply. *And what would* that *entail? I’d like you to keep all your body parts, thank you very much!*

Greyson’s grim expression cracked, and he snorted. “I’m sure she’ll let me keep my eye—I doubt my mother would be pleased if her fiancée started a collection of my body parts.”

“But what about everything else?” I hissed, tugging on his arm as we marched over to the Redwoods. “Non-body-part things. What if she asks for something just as bad?”

*It’s going to be fine*, he told me, just as we ran into Jay and Lola. They, along with Rishika, Artemis, and Ravi, were breaking down the tents.

“How’s the packing going?” Greyson asked.

“We’re almost done,” Jay said.

“Good, because we’re leaving tonight, not tomorrow,” Greyson said.

Rishika’s eyebrows shot up. “What? Why?”

“We feel strongly that the Bitterfangs are going to make a move—just keep packing, and I’ll fill you in as soon as I can,” Greyson said. “Has anybody seen Elle?”

I scanned the group of Redwoods, frowning when I realized that Elle was the only one missing. I’d assumed she’d be here, kicking rocks and grumbling over Greyson not letting her do what she wanted.

“Rishika?” Greyson’s eyes were fixed on his second.

“I thought she was in her tent,” she said. “You told me to let her be, so I didn’t keep tabs on her.”

Greyson squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head. “Of course. I’ll go check.”

We went over to where Elle had been sleeping, but when we pushed the tent flap open, it was empty. Shit. She wasn’t here.

I winced. Elle not staying at the camp despite what Greyson had told her was problematic. She disobeyed Greyson a *lot*. Like, too much. What the hell did that say about their sire bond? It certainly didn’t seem like Dayton and Helix’s.

*So at least there’s a silver lining here?*

Nobody else ever dared to disobey Greyson like that, actually. Or almost nobody. Xavier used to go off without permission all the time, and then there was me. I did have a reputation for doing dangerous stuff, despite being told not to do it. Though how the hell had Elle ended up in the same category as Xavier and me?

“Could Elle be with Lucian?” I asked. “She might’ve just gone to see her mate.”

Greyson’s expression was hard. “Elle might’ve gone to see Lucian, but if she did, she didn’t stay with him.” His gaze flicked to the woods. “She’s gone after Helix.”

**Episode 4008**

“I still think there’s a possibility that Elle is with Lucian,” I said. “She wouldn’t just ignore you and go after Helix, Greyson. She respects you more than that.”

Greyson’s expression was so serious that I knew I’d just struck a nerve. *Shit*.

“Let’s at least check with Lucian before we jump to any conclusions, okay?” I said, reaching for his hand.

“I suppose that’s as good a place to as any start,” Greyson said flatly.

As he stalked off toward the Vanguard campsite, I had to run to keep up with him, which was a bad sign. He’d entered Full Anger territory, and I didn’t know what that meant for Elle. Greyson never really reprimanded the Redwoods—mainly because they respected him enough to obey his orders. But Elle…

“What are you going to do with Elle?” I asked him.

“I’m going to find out where she went, and then I’m going to bring her back,” he said coldly.

I was about to ask for more details, but then we spotted Aysel up ahead. She was sitting in a lawn chair, drinking champagne, and a really hot guy was massaging her shoulders.

“*Unbelievable*,” Greyson muttered.

“I actually think it’s very believable,” I noted.

“Aysel!” Greyson yelled. “Where’s Lucian?”

Aysel giggled, looking over at us with a tipsy smile. “Oh, hello, Greyson! Welcome!”

Greyson came to a halt in front of her, and she looked up at him, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Isn’t it a little late for the two of you to be marching over here like you’re on a mission?” Aysel asked. “Your energy is off. Ask me how I know.”

Greyson’s eye twitched. “And your energy is ridiculous, Aysel.”

“Do you want some champagne?” She lifted a bottle of champagne before frowning at it. “Oh, sorry. I must have drunk it all.”

Greyson pushed the bottle away. “*Where* *are Lucian and Elle?*”

It was rare to see Greyson like this—right on the verge of losing his temper. It was jarring to know that he could deal with a million problems at once without batting an eyelid, but when it came to Lucian and Elle, the tiniest thing could set him off.

Aysel squinted at Greyson, like she was thinking. “Elle and Lucian? Elle and Lucian, hmm…” Greyson opened his mouth to speak, but then Aysel moaned loudly. “Oh yes! Right there!”

She was talking to her masseur, which made things a tiny bit less awkward, but still—hearing Aysel’s borderline pornographic moans had *not* been on my to-do list for the day.

“Your brother, Aysel,” Greyson said sharply. “Where is he? *Focus*.”

Aysel huffed, gesturing toward the forest. “Lucian said he was going to help his mate find her little friend.” Lowering her voice, she added, “But honestly, that might’ve been a euphemism. Proceed at your own risk.”

Greyson turned slightly green, so I stepped in. “Which direction did they go? How long ago did they leave?”

Aysel frowned. “They went north, I think. Or was it—*oh my god, yes!*”

I flinched.

“There, that’s the spot! You’re such a good boy,” Aysel moaned, arching into the hot masseur’s hands. The werewolf smirked, clearly very happy with himself. Meanwhile, Greyson was anything but happy. He’d clenched his jaw so hard I was worried he might break something.

*Aysel’s neck, maybe?*

“Okay, thanks,” I told Aysel, grabbing Greyson’s hand and pulling him away. “Enjoy your, uh, massage!” I called over my shoulder as we walked off.

The moment we were out of earshot, Greyson turned to me.

“We have to find Elle and Lucian, otherwise our plan to deal with the Bitterfangs won’t work,” he said. “As much as I dislike Lucian, we need the Vanguard pack. He has to get his pack in order so we can get things moving.”

I glanced over my shoulder, where Aysel was probably still giving the performance of a lifetime.

“We could go back and talk to Aysel?” I said, though I couldn’t help but grimace at the idea.

Greyson gave me a flat look.

“What?” I huffed. “She *is* the princess—she could pull herself together and get everyone in order, right?”

Greyson sighed, shaking his head. “That’s possible, but I’m not sure how inclined they’d be to listen to her. Regardless, we’ll still need Lucian eventually.”

“But in the meantime, shouldn’t the Vanguard delegation start packing up?” I asked.

After a moment’s hesitation, Greyson nodded curtly. “You’re right.”

He marched back toward Aysel’s tent. She’d moved inside and was lying facedown on a massage table, completely naked as the masseur worked on her lower back. At least it looked like was enjoying himself.

Aysel grinned at Greyson over her shoulder. “Back so soon?”

He shot her a look that spelled trouble. “You can finish your massage later. We’re all leaving soon, so sober up and tell your pack to get ready.”

Aysel sat up, scowling. “What? Why?”

“Just do it,” Greyson said. “I’ll go find your brother.”

The last thing I heard before we left was Aysel speaking to her hot masseur. “I know, darling, that was very rude. But I promise, the Redwood Alpha is usually much more obliging. He even let me abduct him a couple of times!”

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As we headed back to the Redwood camp, I realized I needed to remind Greyson of a very important detail.

“None of your plans are going to work if you can’t convince Big Mac to blip us, Greyson.”

“She’ll do it,” he said tightly.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I said. “Big Mac’s never thrilled about doing magic for the pack, and she made pretty it clear that she doesn’t intend to do any more magic during the Wolf Moon. You’re going to ask her to blip four pack delegations—that’s a lot of blipping, Greyson. It would use up a lot of her energy.”

Greyson paused, turning to look at me. His expression was still thunderous, but I could see a hint of worry shining through.

“I have to make this work,” he said. “We don’t have any other options if we want to get the upper hand. Agreed?”

With a sigh, I nodded, and together we headed for Big Mac’s tent.

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“Get out!” Big Mac barked, shoving a couple of drunken werewolves through the tent flap. “Last call was a half hour ago—I have to clean up!”

The werewolves scurried away, and Big Mac spotted Greyson and me. She immediately started scowling.

*Not an encouraging start...*

“I’m closed,” she declared.

“We’re not here to drink,” Greyson said. “We—”

“Then I really don’t want either of you here,” Big Mac said, walking back into her tent.

Greyson and I exchanged a look before we followed her inside. She’d already started cleaning up when Greyson planted himself in front of her. She looked at him through narrowed eyes. “What now, Greyson?”

“Something came up,” I started, “and—”

“We’re leaving tonight,” Greyson said bluntly.

Big Mac crossed her arms, glowering. “What? The summit isn’t over until tomorrow—I was hoping to sell some bottles in the morning.”

“Forget about the moonshine,” Greyson started, but Big Mac cut him off, outraged.

“*Forget about the moonshine*?” She scoffed. “I have bills to pay and a wife to marry—and your mother doesn’t have cheap taste, Greyson. Do you have any idea how expensive orchids are? And she loves them—she wants orchids *everywhere*.”

“I’ll buy her as many orchids as she wants if you just listen to me right now—”

“I’m done listening! Now go!”

Big Mac wagged a finger at him like he was a misbehaving child. Greyson looked like his head was about to explode.

*Oh my god! Are they going to* fight*?*

I was ready to intervene, but then Greyson took a deep, deep breath, and I realized he was calming himself down. He rarely let the pressure of being Alpha get to him, but I was sure that this Elle situation had the power to push him over the edge. It felt weird to acknowledge that, but it was a fact.

But being rude to Big Mac was a surefire way *not* to get her help, and Greyson knew that as well as I did. He spoke in an even voice. “Big Mac, *please*. We may not make it until morning. Things have escalated with the Bitterfangs, and we’re all in danger. I know this is a big ask, but can you to blip everyone home right now?”

Big Mac’s eyebrows raised. “Who is ‘everyone,’ exactly?”

“The packs in the alliance.”

She actually laughed. “*All* *of them?* You’re seriously asking me to use that much magic during a Wolf Moon, Greyson? Why don’t we do this tomorrow?”

“Because we don’t know what the Bitterfangs are going to do next,” Greyson said. “At least if we head home now and prepare our packs, we’ll be ready for their next move.”

The witch’s eyes went wide, then she shook her head. “Forget it,” she snapped. “I already told you—I’m *not* doing any more magic tonight.”

**Episode 4009**

**Greyson**

Cali and I exchanged a look.

*Try to convince her*, Cali mind linked. *I’ll back you up.*

“I’m sorry, but I can’t take no for an answer, Big Mac,” I said.

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed. “And I’m sorry I’m *not* sorry to disappoint, but I was serious about the ban on magic. You saw what happened with Lola. I’ll admit it—I hadn’t known it would react to Cali getting so close like that. I don’t know how else magic might flare up, and I don’t want to find out.”

“Look, you’re not wrong,” I conceded. “That spell did seem weird and supercharged, but this is urgent. The situation back at camp…”

“Tell her exactly what happened,” Cali said, nudging me.

My mate was right—I needed to be specific.

“The Bitterfangs tore up the tents of all the alliance packs, then said it wasn’t against the summit’s rules. It’s a power move,” I said. And then I let the rest out in one breath. “It seems inevitable that they will most likely try to take things further and provoke us into attacking. We’re not going to, but we don’t know if after the summit they will attack us. Our best bet is to return home, prepare our packs the best way we know how, and wait for the Bitterfangs’ next move, which will most likely be to come to us. I once thought I could prevent a war with alliances and pack numbers, but this latest message tells me one thing: There will be a war. But at least if it takes place on our land, we’ll have the upper hand.”

Big Mac didn’t say anything, which was something of a miracle. Cali gestured for me to go on, but I didn’t know what else to say. Apart from the goddamn obvious.

“MacKenzie.” I took a step closer to her. “They went after my mother. They had the gall to invade our home and attack her there. I don’t know what they might do to take things to the next level, but I need to be there. The sooner we get home, the better.”

Big Mac’s eyes flashed with anger. “Don’t bring Sabine into this.”

I shook my head. “She’s already in it. So are you.” I paused, staring at her. “Help us, MacKenzie. Please.”

Big Mac sighed, pressing her fingers to her temples. Shaking her head, she grumbled, “That’s a lot of people to blip. And on a Wolf Moon? Gods help us all.”

I just stood there, waiting for her to say no again. But I didn’t speak, and Cali didn’t either. She just rested a hand on my back, as if to remind me that she was there, by my side. It made me feel a little steadier.

And then, finally, Big Mac said, “Fine. I’ll do it. But if anything bad happens, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“What could happen?” Cali asked quietly.

Big Mac raised her eyebrows. “Severed hands and limbs and all that—but those are standard blipping risks. Tonight, we’ll also be risking all the dangers that come with the Wolf Moon making magic erratic.”

I swallowed. “I know you’re powerful enough to deal with it.”

She scoffed. “I’m not superstitious about much, but a healthy suspicion of the first full moon of the year was ingrained into me when I was very young.”

I nodded, taking in her words. “I understand. I know that’s a lot of people to transfer, and it’ll take up a lot of your energy. I don’t take this lightly—I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“Fine,” she said dismissively, then waved us out of the tent. “I need a few minutes to pack up. Get out.”

“Thank you,” Cali said, and I echoed her words.

Big Mac just rolled her eyes at us and shooed us out.

Before leaving, I said, “Meet us near our tent when you’re ready.”

She gave me a curt nod and snapped her fingers, closing up her tent and shutting us out.

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“I can’t believe you convinced her to do it,” Cali said as we walked back toward the other Redwoods. “Now we just need to organize all the alliances, get the pack ready to go, and find Elle.”

Elle. Fucking Elle. I didn’t know what I was going to do with her, or where I was going to find her. There were so many moving pieces right now that it felt impossible to get everything I needed to done. I had to act. I couldn’t let myself get overwhelmed by what had to be done: be Alpha.

Cali startled me by suddenly grabbing my hand and squeezing hard.

“What?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

I scanned her carefully, worried that she’d gotten hurt somehow—tripped over a rock or been stung by a venomous magical wasp or something. After all the wild shit Cali had been through, I couldn’t rule anything out.

Smiling a little, Cali took a step closer to me. “I just wanted to say that I love you, and that I appreciate what you’re doing for all the packs to ensure their safety. We can do this, Greyson, okay? Together we can.”

The way she looked at me just made everything… *better*. All of it. “Thank you. Your help is invaluable, love.”

She blushed a lovely scarlet, waving a hand. “Oh, please.”

I moved closer, cupping her cheek. “I mean it. We’re doing this together, Cali. You’re my Luna.” Via mind link, I added, *That mark might technically be fake, but it’s real to me. You have my heart*.

Cali leaned into my touch, looking up at me. “And you have mine,” she whispered.

I stared at her mouth, her pink lips. And when she licked the bottom one, I couldn’t think, couldn’t resist. I kissed her gently, and she slid closer, stretching onto her tiptoes and opening her mouth for me. With the way things were going, I didn’t know when I’d get another chance to do this with her, so I kissed her harder, made it count.

When we broke apart, she was panting, and her voice was throaty. “I wish we could just do this all the time without having to worry about anything else.”

I laughed. “You have the best ideas.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m a visionary. I’m not deluded, though. Speaking of deluded—we still have to find Lucian and Elle.”

I nodded. “I know. The only thing giving me any amount of hope is that he’s found her,” I said. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

“No, I know what you mean. If Lucian is with her, that means he’ll protect her.”

Not wrong. “I’ll go after them, but before I do, I want to tell the pack that everything with Big Mac is squared away.”

“Greyson, you shouldn’t go look for Elle alone. It’s—” Cali spotted something over my shoulder and stopped talking.

I turned to see Xavier marching past, glowering at us. Of course.

“Where are you going?” I called.

Xavier shot me a sharp look, not even slowing down.

“I got Big Mac on board,” I said.

He paused. Turned around. His gaze shifted to Cali and I held my breath, waiting for her reaction. She didn’t stiffen or anything, and I took that as a good sign. A great sign, actually. Finally, Xavier slid his gaze to me again.

“We’ll be ready to leave then,” he said curtly.

I wasn’t sure what the fuck kind of definition Xavier had for the word “ready,” because right now, he seemed both pissed off and bored, which wasn’t ideal for tactical decision-making.

“Just make sure the Samaras are ready to fight,” I said, already turning away. I needed to find Elle and Lucian, before—

“No,” Xavier snapped.

This time, Cali did stiffen.

I turned back to face my brother. “Excuse me?”

Xavier sneered. “You don’t get to tell me what to do. Not anymore. You forget that I’m an Alpha now, too. I don’t have to take orders from you—in fact, I *refuse* to take orders from you.”

He started to walk off in a very “I’m a broody teenager” way, which made me want to commit homicide, but then something stopped him.

Cali.

“Wait!” She grabbed him by the arm, and he froze. Oblivious, she kept talking. “Greyson’s not giving you orders right now—he’s just trying to do what’s best for everyone.”

Xavier hadn’t pulled his arm away. Slowly, he turned. He let her touch him, and when he stared at her, my wolf growled with possessiveness.

That was my mate.

She would be my Luna.

Xavier didn’t fucking deserve to have any kind of claim on her. No more.

“I don’t give a shit about what your precious Alpha wants,” he told Cali coolly. “I’m not doing anything because Greyson said to do it—I’m only doing this because *I* think it’s best.”

Cali’s mouth dropped open, and she let go of his arm. Xavier started walking off toward the Samara campsite without another word.

“That petty little bitch,” I muttered, shaking my head. My anger toward him—ever-present—reared its ugly head. “He’s got a lot of fucking nerve, thinking he can speak to you that way.”

I made a move to follow him, but Cali blocked my way.

“No,” she said firmly. “Xavier knows what needs to be done, and he’ll do it. The rest is just noise.”

She was right. It *was* just noise. It was the whine of my brother’s massive fucking ego.

“Come on,” Cali said, holding out her hand. “Let’s go talk to the pack. We have no time to lose.”

We walked in silence for about a minute before she said, “You know, I’m as angry at Xavier as you are. But, as much as it pains me to say it, you do have to start treating him like another Alpha instead of your little brother.”

I was ready say that if Xavier would just act like a fucking adult, I wouldn’t have to patronize him, but I stopped myself. We didn’t need to argue over this, so I just nodded.

As our tent came into view, Cali spoke up again.

“I don’t think you should go looking for Elle alone,” she said. “The Bitterfangs are a very real danger, and you’re our Alpha. *My* Alpha.”

I loved the way she said that. “Cali—”

“No,” she said, gripping both my hands. “If you leave us now, we’ll be vulnerable. That’s probably just what the Bitterfangs want.”

Cali’s words were a vivid reminder that my safety wasn’t my concern alone. The pack needed me, and so did Cali. She was right.

“I’ll get Rishika or Jay to come with me to look for Elle,” I said.

But she shook her head. “You said that we’re working as one tonight, right? Alpha and Luna? So let’s just go find Elle together, right now.”

**Episode 4010**

**Xavier**

I was fucking *fuming* as I stormed off toward my tent. Who did Greyson think he was, telling me what to do? I hated that his plan made sense, but I hated that Cali had defended him even more. The two of them were acting like a team, now. I wanted to bite Greyson’s fucking hand off for touching her like he owned her.

The thought of his hands on her made me think of her hands on me, and I realized I’d been touching the spot on my arm where Cali had grabbed me. My head ached. I thought back to the kiss we’d shared, earlier. I’d been so desperate for her. It had lit a fire in me that still hadn't gone out—a fire that my wolf was trying to put out with Ava. The thought of the same fire being ignited in Cali, but for my brother…

I didn’t want to think about that for a single second.

Maybe their obvious connection was what really bothered me about this entire situation. Would I ever get used to the reality of Cali being with Greyson? I knew the answer to that: no way in hell. And right now there was nothing I could even do about it.

Adéluce had to be so fucking happy about all this.

“You okay?”

Ava’s voice startled me. I dropped my hand away from my arm like I’d been burned. Because I *wasn’t* okay.

Part of me wanted to go after Cali and Greyson, to join them in their search for Elle and Lucian. Because Cali was my mate, and Greyson was my brother. And I hated him ninety-nine percent of the time, but I knew that whatever the fuck was happening between Lucian and Elle was bad news. Elle didn’t deserve that. She was still so new to the human world… And she was a Redwood. I used to be loyal to the Redwoods, but that had been stolen from me.

Shaking my head to clear it, I glanced at Ava. “I’m fine. Let’s just get everyone ready to leave.”

I made a move to turn, but Ava blocked my way. “Xavier, stop. Talk to me.”

“I don’t have time to talk—I need to make sure our people are ready to go.”

“What do you think your Luna’s been doing?” Ava asked, eyeing me. “We’re ready—just waiting for our Alpha.”

I felt like shit for trying to brush her off. The fight I’d just had with Greyson wasn’t her fault.

“Sorry for—”

“We don’t need apologies,” she interrupted. “We need you.” She wrapped her arms around my neck, her breath hot against my ear. “And *I* need you most of all.”

My wolf stirred at the ring of truth in her words. The possessiveness in her voice. Ava was my Luna, and nobody else’s. I’d seen how the other men had looked at her tonight, seen how much they fucking wanted her—but she only wanted me. My mind went back to the image of her on all fours on the forest floor, arching her back for me, presenting herself, the mark I’d left on her shoulder on full display.

They wanted her, but she wanted *me*.

She wanted me so badly, I could smell it on her all the time.

“Fuck…” The word sounded rough when it escaped my mouth—a little like a laugh, but tortured.

I gripped Ava’s nape, tangling my fingers in her hair before I pulled her in for a kiss. She opened up her mouth for me, gluing herself against me. Heat burned between our bodies.

When she broke away from the kiss, she was panting.

“You need—” She swallowed. “You need to stop doing this to yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

She took my face between her hands, her piercing blue eyes fixed on mine. “You need to stop looking at what you’ve lost, and start enjoying what you’ve gained.”

She was right, of course, but saying it was a lot easier than making it happen. Cali would always be in my heart, no matter how close Ava and I became. I had to be careful with what I said, with how much I opened up to Ava. I couldn’t tell her that my wolf craved her.

I couldn’t tell her that I needed her, too.

It was too much of a possibility that if I gained real feelings for Ava—feelings I didn’t want in the first place—that Adéluce would see that as reason to do to Ava what she’d done to me and Cali. Or was she allowing it because being with Ava was so painful? A reminder that I was in this position with Ava because I couldn’t be with Cali? Did Adéluce get off on the fact that I’d once killed Ava? That there was so much painful baggage between us that this relationship could never be anything but chaotic?

I didn’t speak, just kissed her again. I hoped it would be enough to ease Ava’s mind and make her stop fretting. To stop asking dangerous questions.

The kiss kept going, and Ava’s hands moved under my shirt. She moaned into my mouth, and I remembered that we’d been interrupted by Marissa, earlier. I felt like bending her over again, right here, right now…

But while my wolf agreed that fucking Ava senseless was the only solution to all my problems ever, I knew I needed to get a fucking grip. The Bitterfangs were coming, and I had work to do.

“Let’s go and make sure that everyone’s packed and ready to leave the summit,” I said, still breathing hard after cutting off the kiss.

Was I using that as an excuse, or was it the truth? Was I simply afraid to give in to my growing feelings for Ava because Adéluce was lurking? Or did I feel guilty about being with Ava when I knew that Cali was the love of my life? In a way, I was betraying every woman who mattered to me. Ava, because I loved Cali. Cali, because I couldn’t resist Ava. Both of them, because Adéluce had forced me into a situation that was putting us all in grave danger.

My mates were in danger, and it was all my fault.

“We’ll make sure our pack is ready for whatever’s coming,” Ava said, stroking my cheek. She smiled, then, raising an eyebrow. “We have a great leader now, after all.”

Her praise was good, but bad as well.

Good because it was the one bright thing I had left.

Bad because if Adéluce realized what I was starting to feel, Ava would be fucked.

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When we got back to the Samara campsite, the delegation was still talking about the slashed-up tents. I was glad to see that they were packed up and ready to go.

The moment she saw us, Marissa ended her conversation and jogged over.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “What’s the plan? Are we reporting this to the council?”

I nodded. “I’ll fill them in.”

I doubted it would do any good, but the nods of approval told me that this was what the Samaras wanted, so I’d do it anyway.

“But the more immediate plan is to head to the rendezvous point and wait for our allies,” I said. “And then we leave.”

“What?” The sound of Knox’s whiny voice made me want to punch something. He pushed through the group to come and stand in front of me, an insolent look on his face. “Why the fuck would we wait for them? Why not just get out of here now on foot, while we still can?”

I glared at him. “We leave together because there is strength in numbers.”

I hated that I was parroting my brother’s words, but they were the best way to explain the plan.

“And if they shit on the summit’s rules and attack while we wait?” Knox asked with a huff. “It’s better if they’re left behind anyway. We can get away, and they can distract the Bitterfangs that way.”

It took everything I had not to punch him in the face.

“That’s not what we agreed to do,” I said, through clenched teeth. “We are in an alliance with the other packs. We aren’t leaving anyone to be caught in a potential attack.”

Knox scoffed. “But we’re Samaras first. We should take care of our own, shouldn’t we?” He looked over his shoulder at Blaine and Zipper, who had seemingly materialized out of nowhere. “Right?” he prompted, and they both nodded.

I was really starting to wonder if I should’ve kicked up more of a fuss over the council’s decision to lump me with these assholes. Maybe offered to kill Knox myself, if the council didn’t have the stomach for it. If I didn’t assert my authority as Alpha right now, this was going to become a problem. I had to nip their bullshit in the bud before it grew and poisoned us all.

“I’m the Alpha here, Knox,” I said, stepping forward and getting in his smug fucking face. “I don’t need to explain my decisions to you.”

Knox glared at me defiantly. “Well, I don’t follow orders that could get me killed, Xavier. What are you going to do about that?”

**Episode 4011**

Greyson had picked up Elle’s scent in the woods, so we were moving quickly through the dense aspen trees as we followed it, searching for her.

“Elle!” I called out. “Elle! Can you hear me?”

I didn’t know if she’d respond, even if she *could* hear me.

I glanced up at Greyson, whose eyes looked stormy. “What are you going to do when you find her?” I asked him.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “I’m going to make her give up on this ridiculous hunt for Helix and come back home with us.”

My heart sank. “Greyson, you’ve already tried that. Elle’s a very loyal person—you of all people should know that. I know you want her to leave Helix alone, but I don’t think it’s going to be that easy to make her give up on him.”

I didn’t actually think it would be fair of us to ask that of her, either, though I didn’t say that part out loud. I figured we could cross that bridge when we got to it.

Next to me, Greyson suddenly tensed.

I stopped in my tracks. *Do you hear something?* I asked him silently.

He nodded, his eyes trained on a spot somewhere to the left. *It sounded like a fight. We need to be careful.*

I swallowed hard, my stomach clenching with nerves. *Okay*.

He nodded toward the spot, indicating that I should follow him, and we started to walk. The woods were quiet, so when Greyson half-shifted, the cracking bones sounded disproportionately loud.

It wasn’t long before I could hear the sound of fighting too, and I peered through the trees, searching for the source. I could tell the fight involved at least two wolves, given all the growls and yelping I could hear.

We moved quickly, and it wasn’t long before I saw movement.

I let out a gasp when I recognized Elle and Lucian’s wolves. An instant later, the grey wolf they were fighting bit down on Elle’s back leg. Lucian snarled, diving for the wolf.

Elle let out a shill yelp and twisted free. A third wolf—a tawny brown one, who’d been hidden until now—lunged for the wolf biting Elle, but Lucian stepped between the two. Elle pivoted and raced back to stand in front of the grey wolf. She was *protecting* the wolf who’d just bitten her.

I stared at the scene in front of me, flabbergasted. What the *hell* was I looking at?

*What’s happening?* I asked Greyson. *We need to help them!*

He shook his head sharply. *It looks like Elle’s trying to defend Helix from Dayton, and Lucian’s just getting in the way.*

I looked back, finally recognizing one of the wolves as Helix.

*But—that’s the wolf who bit Elle*, I said, stunned.

*I know*, Greyson said, growling low in his throat.

*Why is Helix attacking Elle?*

*Because Elle is protecting him from Dayton*, Greyson said, sounding grim.

*What?* I asked, baffled. *Greyson, what are you talking about? You’re not making any sense.*

*By fighting Dayton, Elle’s igniting the sire bond in Helix. Every time she makes a move against Dayton in order to defend Helix, Helix is driven to attack* her*. Even though she’s protecting him, Helix can’t help it.*

I stared at the fighting wolves, shocked.

*This is awful*, I said, my heart aching.

I hated that the sire bond could force Helix—could force *anyone*—to attack a friend so savagely. I knew how Elle felt about Helix, and if he felt the same way about her, there was no way he’d be going after her voluntarily.

Without thinking, I started toward them, but Greyson grabbed my arm to hold me back.

*Stay here, Cali.*

He leapt forward just as Helix was about to rip into Elle again for clawing at Dayton. Lucian inserted himself yet again, but Dayton threw him back. The Vanguard Alpha slammed hard against a tree, and there was a distinct *crack*.

Snarling, Elle turned—about to pounce—but when she recognized Greyson, she froze.

“STOP THIS! NOW!” Greyson roared. “ALL OF YOU!”

Geena stepped out of the woods, where she must have been waiting, safe from the fight. “Stay out of this, Greyson. This is Nightshade pack business.”

Greyson stared at her, then at Dayton, disgust evident on his face. “Are you fucking *kidding* me? Is this what you meant when you said you’d *take care of* Helix?”

“He’s bringing the council’s anger down on our pack,” Geena snapped. “We can’t have this hanging over our heads. Helix was never even a member of our pack to begin with. He went rogue. We have no loyalty to him. So just take your pack mates and get out of here before they get hurt. This is our business, and we’ll take care of it.”

I rushed over to Lucian, who was lying on the ground. He wasn’t moving, so I crouched down by his side. To my relief, I found that he was still breathing, though the fact that he was unconscious at all meant that Dayton had really hit him hard against the tree. Alphas fighting each other was serious business…

“I’m not going to let you kill him,” Greyson said coldly.

“I told you to leave,” Geena repeated.

“I promised Elle that Helix wouldn’t die,” Greyson said.

Geena didn’t look moved by this. “Well, that was a mistake. It’s not your call to make.” She looked over to where Elle was still standing between Helix and Dayton, baring her teeth. “I don’t care if your pack member has some kind of affection for the wolf—it doesn’t matter. We will handle our business however we see fit.”

I looked up at Greyson, who was glowering at Geena, and felt my heart pounding. I was scared. I didn’t know how this was all going to go. Greyson looked angry, but so did Geena. Was she going to shift and attack? She seemed keyed up and was leaning forward aggressively, her fingers flexing.

“This is my final warning,” Greyson growled. “Back off. If you don’t want Helix anymore, then just let us take him. We’ll assume responsibility for him.”

Apparently, Geena didn’t think much of this offer, because she shifted into her wolf form and leapt at Greyson.

In the blink of an eye, Greyson shifted as well, lunging forward to meet her in the middle.

The other wolves had stopped fighting while Greyson and Geena spoke, but now that their conversation was over, Helix immediately went after Elle again. She howled with pain as his teeth sank into her shoulder and I gasped, clapping my hands over my mouth.

Geena and Greyson were going at each other, Helix was going after Elle, Elle was going after Dayton, Dayton was going after Elle, and I didn’t know what the hell to do.

In desperation, I summoned my magic and blasted Geena. I caught her in the shoulder, just as she was pouncing on Greyson’s back.

Dayton had seen everything, and he rounded on me with a terrifying snarl. Greyson saw Dayton going after me, but he was too far away to do anything to stop him.

I got to my feet and stumbled backward, trying to focus enough to conjure my shield. But Dayton was closing in on me. Crap! Giving up on the shield, I hit him with a blast of magic.

And then Elle was there, slamming into Dayton as he was launched backward by my magic. She kept the momentum going, ramming him into an aspen tree.

He hit the tree with a sickening crunch of bone and wood, then he collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

I’d barely breathed a sigh of relief when Helix let out a furious howl and lunged toward Elle, leaping onto her back and sinking his teeth into her neck. The wolf-scream she let out sliced through the freezing night like a knife.

“*Elle!*” I screamed, surging toward her. This time, my magic obeyed, and my sword practically exploded into existence.

Greyson pulled away from Geena and sprang toward Helix, but he hesitated, and I could see why. Helix’s grip on Elle’s neck was so tight that if he bit down any harder, he’d probably snap her neck.

I stepped forward, sword in hand, but when I met Elle’s eyes, I paused. I couldn’t mind link with her, but I didn’t need to. I could see the look in her eyes—she was pleading with me to stop.

My heart broke for her. I knew how difficult this had to be for her, how scared she had to be, so I did as she asked. I let my sword dissipate, then regathered the energy into my shield. He smacked right into it, hard enough that he released Elle and stumbled backward.

He shifted back to human. “*Elle*—” he started, looking around, blinking in confusion. But then he fell to the ground, unconscious.

Elle started toward him, but only managed a single step before her legs gave out and she fell to the ground. She was weak and actively losing blood, and her breath was coming in short, pained gasps.

Greyson shifted back to human and rushed to her side. He used his hands to apply pressure to the wound on her neck.

I’d only just started toward Helix when Cesaries stepped out of the trees. He was flanked by the rest of the council, and they stopped and looked around, taking in the scene.

“Well,” Cesaries said loftily. “It appears we’ve arrived just in time.”

**Episode 4012**

**Xavier**

My hands curled into fists, and it was basically everything I could do to not punch Knox in his smirking little face. I hadn’t wanted Knox to rejoin the pack, and—*big fucking surprise*—my instincts had been spot-on. The shrimp was toxic as hell, annoying, and clearly in desperate need of a beating.

I was over it. The council could do whatever the hell they wanted at this point—the kid had pushed way too many buttons for me to let this go on any longer.

Ava must have been thinking along the same lines, because she stepped forward and roughly grabbed the fabric of her cousin’s shirt, hauling him toward her. “If you want to be part of this pack, then you’d better listen to your Alpha. Or should I tell the council that you three have chosen to give up your wolves instead?”

Fear and anger flashed through Knox’s eyes as he got his feet back underneath him. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh yeah?” Ava raised an eyebrow, and when she spoke, her voice was cold enough to freeze lava. “You want to try me?”

Knox clearly knew her well enough to believe her, so he shook his head, then pulled free of her grip and took a step back. He still looked angry, but he knew that he was beaten.

“No,” he muttered, glancing down at the ground. “I’ll listen to him.” He glanced at Zipper and Blaine. “We all will.”

Bitterly, I had to admit that I was kind of disappointed. I was feeling pretty frustrated about a lot of things, and it would’ve felt good to deliver a good beat down to someone who really deserved it.

Ava looked around at the rest of the Samaras, who’d been watching in silence. “Finish packing and be ready to leave in five minutes.”

When they moved away without argument or discussion, I whipped around, ready to storm back to my tent.

“X,” Ava said, putting her hand on my arm. “Do you need a second to cool off?”

“I need to pack,” I snapped, but when I tried to move away again, she tightened her grip.

“Hey, what you *need* is to calm the hell down so you don’t start making bad decisions,” she said firmly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

She narrowed her eyes. “It *means* that it won’t look good for the pack if our Alpha allows himself to lose his shit because *Knox* pissed him off. So take a breath, or take a minute, or whatever you need to do to get it together, Xavier.”

I opened my mouth to snap back but managed to stop myself before I said anything. The thing was, Ava was right. And more than that, this wasn’t her fault. She’d helped me back there with Knox. She was being a good Luna to me already, and I *did* need to get my shit together.

I took a deep breath and looked into her eyes, letting the strength in them calm me down. “Thank you. For the kick in the ass. I needed that.”

She gave me a small smile. “Anytime.”

I smiled back, feeling truly grateful for her. Making her my Luna had been the right choice.

I was about to head for our tent to pack when suddenly, I heard a voice that made my blood freeze in my veins.

“Well, well, well. I see you and your Luna are already making a great team.”

I turned to see Malakai and Honora coming slowly toward me, making their way past the rows of ruined tents. My whole body went tense at the sight of them, and I immediately scanned the area for the rest of the Bitterfang delegation, wondering if they’d come back to attack in earnest this time.

But I didn’t see anyone else, and I could only pick up Malakai and Honora’s scents in the air.

I wouldn’t have minded going on the offensive with the Bitterfang—it was what I’d wanted to do all along, ever since Malakai had threatened Cali—but there was Ava to think about. I shot her a sidelong glance. I didn’t want her to get caught up in my personal vendetta against the Bitterfangs. And the council would probably take action against both of us for inciting violence—we seemed to be unlucky that way—even though the Bitterfangs had made the first move by slashing our tents.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, my shoulders still tight with tension.

Malakai gave me a smile that was probably supposed to be charming. “Xavier Evers, why the hostility? Honora and I just came by to congratulate the both of you. Isn’t that customary, after a Luna ceremony?”

“But you both disappeared from the festivities before we could pass on our good wishes,” Honora added with a placid smile.

“Now, Honora,” Malakai said, taking her hand and smiling fondly. “You remember how quickly we rushed away from our own Luna ceremony. These two are just the same.”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t like having *anything* in common with these two, and I didn’t trust the smarmy smile on Malakai’s face. Or the hard look in Honora’s eyes.

I let myself think about how easy it would be to slash those looks right off their faces but forced myself to take a breath. Perhaps that was exactly why they’d come—to bait me into doing something they could use against me. Or maybe even to try to start the pack war right here and now.

They were staring at me, clearly waiting for me to say something, so I gave my shoulders a stiff shrug.

“We were busy,” I said flatly.

My jaw worked, and I debated confronting them about the shredded tents, but thought better of it. As much as I wanted to hear whatever paper-thin excuse they’d come up with, I knew that now wasn’t the time. I had to bite my tongue and go with this plan whether I liked it or not. We had to lie low, leave the summit, and regroup in a place where we had the better tactical advantage. That was what we’d decided on as an alliance, so that was what I was going to do.

The problem was, Malakai didn’t leave.

“I heard there was an unfortunate incident in your camp tonight,” he said, surveying the ruined tents. He shook his head with manufactured concern. “Such a shame. I hope this hasn’t upset your pack.”

The urge to shift and attack was so strong, it was nearly overpowering. I wanted to shift, lunge at Malakai, and drag my claws across his smug face. There was just something about this Alpha that got under my skin in the worst way… No, I knew exactly what it was—he reminded me too much of Silas, and being around him put me on edge in a way that I hadn’t experienced in a long time.

“Maybe you should find some more suitable hobbies than concern for my pack,” I said, through gritted teeth. “The tents were provided by the council, just like everyone else’s, so I’m sure they’ll look into who was responsible. But as far as the Samaras are concerned, there’s no need to worry. It was just a bit of petty vandalism. A minor annoyance, really—like a fly buzzing around our heads.”

I watched for the effect of my words, and knew I’d managed to push a few of Malakai’s buttons when I saw displeasure flash across his face. But it was gone an instant later, and he flashed his smile at me, his expression smugly bland once again. If I could wipe it off of his face, I would.

“Yes, but I hate that your pack had to experience such unpleasantness—especially here at the summit, when you’re surrounded by your own kind. And so soon after becoming whole again, too. The Luna ceremony…” He nodded toward Ava, and my anger started to boil up inside me. “You are the perfect choice, Ava. Your line goes back centuries. That’s the kind of purity I like to see. And Xavier, I’m so glad that you’ve chosen to remove yourself from the riffraff and mongrels of the Redwood pack. I commend you on that very wise decision.”

*That’s not why I left the Redwood pack*. That was what I wanted to shout at the asshole, but I bit my tongue. There was a *lot* I wanted to say to Malakai, but I knew it would be a mistake to open my mouth, because once I got started, it would be hard to stop, and I didn’t want to let my temper get the best of me.

Malakai smiled, apparently assuming that my silence was an endorsement of his statement. He leaned closer to me. I tried to stay nonchalant. “And that, my boy, is why I’ve come.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

His smile grew into a grin. “I’m here with a proposition.”

**Episode 4013**

**Greyson**

Shocked, I stared up at Cesaries. I was floored to see him there, especially with the other councilors. *What the hell?* We were in the middle of the woods, in the middle of the night. Had they been tracking us? How had they even found us?

But I couldn’t dwell on that—not now. I looked back down at Elle, who was unconscious now, and still bleeding. The blood was seeping into her red fur, and in the darkness, it looked back as tar. It squeezed through my fingers as I tried to push down, trying to apply pressure to the wound. I needed it to start healing, and—to my absolute relief—when I lifted my hands to check it, I found that the skin had already started to knit itself back together. *Thank god*.

Cesaries pointed at Helix. “We’ll take that Rogue wolf into custody now.”

I looked down at Elle, then back at Cesaries. “Why?” I demanded. “He’s just a Rogue. He’s not even part of the summit—your rules don’t apply to him.”

Cesaries chuckled smugly. “Oh, Alpha Greyson Evers, always so magnanimous. However, it’s clear to us that this Rogue was responsible for instigating this fight. We don’t blame any of the rest of you, so don’t worry about reprisals. No, we’ve known for a while now that there was a Rogue in our midst, and we’ve been looking for him. And now—thanks to all of you—we’ve found him.”

I took a moment to be privately astonished that the historically ineffectual council had managed to figure all that out. Then I glanced at Cali, who looked worried.

Cesaries clasped his hands together. “We appreciate you all doing the heavy lifting for us. We have reason to believe that this Rogue killed the wolf from the Northwind pack. Evan, I think his name was. Now, you know how it goes. We must see that justice is served swiftly.”

Cali looked quickly over at me. *Justice? For the council, that probably means death!*

*I know*, I said grimly.

“Do you have proof of that?” I asked Cesaries.

His eyes snapped to me, and for a moment, I felt a flash of the man’s power. It seemed to radiate off him, and I was suddenly very aware of the influence he could wield, but I held my ground.

Cesaries narrowed his eyes at me. “It would be in your best interest, Alpha Evers, not to question the council. Let us take it from here.” Then his expression cleared, and he smiled again. “Thank you all for your cooperation.”

He waved, and two members of the council guard moved toward Helix, who was still unconscious on the ground.

I moved to shield Elle from the council as she blinked her eyes open, coming to. She took a breath and started to move, then struggled upright. Her wound was healing, and she shifted back to human and looked around.

She opened her mouth when she saw Cesaries, but nothing came out.

I gripped her arm and pulled her to my side. “*Stay here*,” I said, staring down at her.

I was *not* going to let her act out against the council. Not here. Not now.

She yanked against my hold, clearly trying to free herself and get to Helix, but I held firm.

“Stop,” I said. “*Now*. I won’t tell you again, Arielle.”

She stilled when I spoke, though her body stayed tense and ready.

We watched as Cesaries walked over to Helix, holding a silver collar. Elle jerked when she saw that, but I kept hold of her.

*Are they really doing that?* Cali asked me. She sounded disgusted. *That’s so dehumanizing.*

Before I could respond, she stepped forward and spoke aloud.

“Is that really necessary?” she demanded. “He’s already unconscious.”

Cesaries frowned at her. “We know what he is, Luna Hart. He’s a Rogue, and a dangerous one at that. He’s hurt our fellow werewolves. This is a very serious matter indeed and yes, the collar is necessary.”

Elle flinched as the collar clicked shut on Helix’s neck.

Cali stepped to my side. *Will that hurt him?*

I gritted my teeth*. It’ll make it impossible for him to shift back to his wolf form. If he tried, it would cut into his skin and kill him instantly, the way silver always does. It’s risky, of course, but it’s also the best way to hold someone. In the council’s eyes, at least.*

Cali nodded. *They did it to Knox, too.*

She shook her head, looking sad, but didn’t protest when the two guards pulled Helix up and dragged him off into the trees.

Once the council members were out of sight, Elle yanked her arm from my grasp.

“Helix!” she cried desperatelyout, her voice a rasp. “Where are they taking him? What are they going to do with him? We have to go after him!”

She started after them, but I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back, then whirled her around and forced her to look at me.

“Elle! Stop! You can’t go after them like this. You’re hurt. And it was a miracle they didn’t take you in for fighting, too. We have to let you heal up before we do anything else—”

“I don’t care!” she exploded. “They could hurt my friend, Greyson!”

I thought for a moment. I knew there was a possibility that I couldn’t hide from Elle—she had seen Knox’s trial—so I just said it. “It won’t be immediate, whatever they do. We have time. They’ll have to hold an inquiry.”

Cali put a hand on Elle’s shoulder, which made her flinch away.

“Come on, Elle. Let’s go back to the camp for now, okay? We’ll figure this out. We will. *Right*, Greyson?” she asked, looking pointedly up at me.

I knew the look in Cali’s eyes. It said, be patient this is all really stressful. I had to remember that this involved Elle’s good friend. If it were one of my friends, I’d likely be just as difficult. Elle’s loyalty was a good trait to have, but she was stubborn to boot.

But Cali was right, of course.

I sighed. “Right.”

Elle looked between us for a moment, then—finally—she dropped her head, defeated. “Fine.”

I breathed a sigh of relief—I’d assumed I’d have to drag her back to camp—but before we could start walking, Elle twisted in my arms again.

“Lucian!”

Shit. I’d forgotten about Lucian.

The princeling was still on the ground, and he groaned when Elle called his name. He’d shifted back to human form and pulled himself up to lean against a tree, looking dazed, but more or less okay.

He smiled shakily at Elle. “Don’t you worry, my forest rose. I’m all right.”

I glanced at Cali, and we shared a skeptical look.

“Can you walk?” I asked Lucian.

He nodded and pushed away from the tree. He looked around, and when he saw my hand on Elle’s waist and the blood down her neck, he glowered. “*Good god!* Greyson Evers, I demand you release my mate at once! What happened? My sweet forest rose, what has befallen you? Are you all right?”

Elle nodded.

I rolled my eyes at Lucian. Everything about him made me crazy—the pet names, the elevated language, the absurd theatrics… It was like he’d never seen a werewolf fight before.

“I’m fine,” Elle told him firmly.

“She’s fine,” I repeated, because Lucian didn’t look convinced. “Let’s go. We need to get back to camp.”

We started walking, and I kept my hand on Elle’s waist. I wanted her next to me, and to make sure she didn’t make any sudden moves.

*I’m sorry about this*, I told Cali.

She sighed. *I understand*, she said, her mental voice heavy. *I just hope we can actually fix this.*

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. *I hope so, too.*

The woods were dark and quiet as we made our way through them, not even bothering to look for a path. I led the way, crashing through the thin underbrush, and by the time we made it back to the encampment, Elle and Lucian had almost completely healed from their injuries—though there was still dried blood streaked down Elle’s neck and shoulders, which didn’t look great.

When we stepped out of the woods, I finally let Elle go.

“Why don’t you help her clean up,” I said, glancing at Cali.

“Sure,” she said, reaching for Elle’s hand. “Then what?”

“Then we have to meet with the others and explain everything.”

“Explain what?” Lucian asked.

I sighed. Yeah. Exactly. *What*, indeed.

“Okay, Elle,” Cali said, grasping her hand. “Let’s get that blood off you—”

But Elle yanked her hand out of Cali’s grip and whipped around to face me, her eyes wild and desperate. “*No.*! We need to go talk to the council.!”

“Elle—” I started, but she spoke over me.

“This isn’t up for debate to me, Greyson,” she said. “We have to go see them.! *Now*. We have to explain that this wasn’t Helix’s fault.!”

**Episode 4014**

**Xavier**

I scowled at Malakai and Honora. A proposition? What the hell were they talking about? A proposition for what? What did they think they could possibly propose to me that I’d be interested in?

*I don’t like the sound of that*, Ava mind linked to me, and I was unexpectedly rocked by the sound of her voice in my head.

There was just something about it… Was it the clarity of her voice? The way the sound seemed to reverberate? It was like it resonated through my bones, making my whole body hum. My wolf surged within me, and even though what she had said hadn’t been remotely suggestive, I found myself wanting her more in that moment than I could remember feeling in a long, *long* time.

What the hell was this about? Was this because of the Luna ceremony? Was the increased intensity because of the new bond we’d created? I’d felt a surge of something when we’d kissed after the ceremony, and I knew I’d felt connected to her in a new, more intense way, so maybe this was part of it. All I knew for sure was that mind linking had never felt in the past. It almost made me want to shift, hunt and kill prey, and lay it at her feet, like the wolf that I was. What I felt was a hot surge of desire—but even that felt like it was only scratching the surface of the tide of emotion within me.

What I felt reminded me of the feeling that my kiss with Cali had ignited.

*No*, I told Ava, pulling my thoughts together so I could answer her. *This is nothing good. They need to leave. Now.*

“Not interested,” was what I said out loud. “I’m sure you know your way back to your campsite.”

Malakai cocked his head. “Really? You don’t even want to talk it out? To hear what I have to propose? I know you’re both new to being Alpha and Luna, but surely you’re smarter than that. Hear me out at least, then you can make a decision.”

Ava and I exchanged a glance.

*Let’s just get this over with*, she said. *He probably won’t leave until we listen.*

I didn’t like it, but she was probably right. It was likely the only way we were going to get them to leave us the hell alone. Anyway, I would be *slightly* curious to hear what Malakai was offering. And it could prove useful later on—maybe by telling us what he wanted, he’d reveal a weakness. But I had to be careful. That kind of thing went both ways, and I had to make sure I didn’t reveal any weaknesses of my own.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Fine. Talk.”

Malakai smiled. “Very wise, Xavier. After a great deal of thought, Honora and I have realized that although the Samara pack hid my daughter, you didn’t kill her. I can believe that the Samaras were roped into the whole fiasco because of Greyson. And—of course—you weren’t the Alpha of the Samaras at that point, so I’m prepared to allow you to make a clean break from the Redwoods with your new pack.”

He was going to *allow* me? Where the fuck did this guy get off saying something like that? The fact was, I’d already broken off from the Redwood pack whether I’d wanted to or not. I didn’t need his help with anything.

I chuckled. “That’s very generous of you, but I don’t need your permission.”

Malakai’s smile widened. “Good. Glad to hear it. Now, just denounce your brother and break your alliance with the Redwoods. Prove that the Samaras should not be held accountable for the sins of the Redwood pack.”

“*And*…?” I pressed. Where was he going with all this?

Malakai raised an eyebrow. “*And* we will leave you alone.”

I took this in. Malakai was making some serious errors in judgment, here. He was underestimating both me and the Samara pack.

“And why should we trust you?” Ava asked sharply.

“I might do things my own way, but my honor is something I hold dear,” Malakai said gravely. “When I give my word, I keep it.” There was a beat of heavy silence, then he looked over at me. “*Well?*”

I shook my head. “I’m not even going to dignify this with a response.”

To my surprise, Malakai laughed. “I can see you need some time to think this over. That’s fine. But I hope to hear from you soon, Xavier Evers.”

“No, I don’t need time to think,” I said curtly. “I’ve already made up my mind. Get the fuck out.”

Malakai’s smile disappeared, and when he spoke, the threat in his voice was crystal clear. “I’m still going to give you some time. I would hate to see the Samara pack destroyed when you’ve worked so hard to find your footing again.”

He turned and took Honora’s elbow, leading her away.

Ava and I watched them go in silence. Thankfully, they hadn’t turned back. Hopefully they wouldn’t come back either.

“That guy really pisses me off,” she finally said.

“You’re going to take his deal, right?”

I turned around, surprised to see Knox behind me. I frowned at him, angry to find that he’d been listening the whole time like a goddamn spy. “What?”

“You’re going to take it, yeah?” he said again. “That deal?”

“Of course not,” I spat. “We’re in an alliance. What the hell do you think that means, dummy? We gave our word to the other packs.”

Knox’s face darkened. “Who cares? Shouldn’t we be doing whatever we can to survive?”

I took a deep breath, praying for patience. “Knox, I’m going to give you two fucking seconds to get the fuck out of my face.”

Knox scowled hard but turned and stalked away.

Ava looked at me. “You’re not considering it, are you?”

I pushed a hand through my hair. “I have some… complicated feelings about my brother, but he *is* still my brother. And I was born into the Redwood pack. I’m not going to betray the alliance.”

Ava nodded in approval, apparently satisfied, and I realized I was a little surprised by that. I thought about it and realized I just hadn’t really pegged her as someone who’d be dedicated to an alliance—especially not one involving the Redwood pack, with whom she hadn’t always had a rosy relationship.

But then again, Ava had changed a lot since she’d come back from the dead. No one knew that better than me.

“There’s something we can do that might help the alliance,” Ava said, startling me out of my thoughts.

I looked at her. “What’s that?”

She took my hand and led me away from the ruined Samara tents. We walked for a while, until we reached the middle of the summit encampment. I didn’t quite realize where we were heading until I found myself being led straight toward the council tent. The thing was huge—much bigger than the tiny little tents they’d provided for everyone else—and ornate, with clear plastic windows that shone with the lantern light from inside.

Inside, there were dozens of chairs set up around a massive table, but only two were occupied when we walked in.

We stopped in the doorway of the tent and looked around.

“Where’s the rest of the council?” Ava asked.

A small man was slouched in a chair in the far corner of the table, and he sat up a little straighter when Ava spoke, trying to look like he hadn’t just been dozing off.

“Out taking care of council business,” he said, clearly trying to sound officious. “What can I do for you?”

I looked down at the reedy little man. “Our campsite was attacked tonight.”

The councilor’s eyes widened alarmingly. “Oh my. Now that is a serious allegation.”

“It’s not an allegation,” Ava said shortly. “It’s a fact. “We’re just reporting it.”

“I see.” He cleared his throat. “Was anyone hurt?”

“Just our tents,” I said.

The councilor seemed almost disappointed to hear that, as if he’d been hoping for more salacious gossip. “Ah, yes. I see. And do you have any idea who might have done it?”  
 “Yeah, I know exactly who was responsible,” I said. “It was the Bitterfang pack.”

The councilor looked at me for a moment, then frowned. “Yes. And?”

“And…” I glanced over at Ava, then back at the man. “And that goes against the no violence rule, doesn’t it?”  
 The councilor shrugged. “Well, I don’t see how. You said yourself that no one was hurt, which means that there’s nothing we can do about this *attack*,” he said, putting unmistakable verbal quotation marks around the word.

I felt irritation creep up my throat like bile. This was exactly why the Bitterfangs got away with shit—because of the council’s incompetence. “So, are you telling me that you *can’t* do anything, or that you just *won’t*?”

**Episode 4015**

Greyson’s jaw was set. “Elle, stop. No matter what we do, you are not going to be the one doing it. And we’re not going to try to rush something as sensitive as this.”

His tone made it clear that he was serious, and though Elle opened her mouth, likely to protest, she closed it. She knew, like I did, that it wasn’t going to work.

I stepped toward her and tried to put my arm around her shoulders. “I know you’re worried about Helix, Elle—”

She moved away from me, looking scared and pissed off.

Greyson sighed. “I need to go fill the pack in on what’s been going on.”

He rubbed his jaw, looking tired and anxious. He was under a lot of stress—and no wonder. He was trying to deal with so much.

*Is there anything I can do to help?* I asked.

He glanced over at me. *I don’t know…*

*I want to help if I can.*

*I know, love*, he said. *But I feel like I should be the one to help Elle through this. I feel responsible for her, and for this situation. I should be the one to talk to the council about it.*

I hesitated. I thought of how Greyson had felt responsible for Elle since the day he’d turned her. For the hundredth time, I wondered if there was more to it than the promise he’d made to her father to protect her. I wondered if the sense of obligation Greyson was dealing with was the sire bond in action.

*Listen, Greyson*, I said. *I think it’s great that you want to help Elle—I really do—but you aren’t the one who turned Helix. You aren’t responsible for him. If anyone should be dealing with the fallout from that, it should be Dayton.*

Greyson’s expression darkened. *Yeah, well, I don’t have a lot of faith that Dayton will do the right thing there. And I don’t think Elle does, either. Can’t blame her, can I?*

*Ugh.* I figured he was probably right. I looked around and saw bags and backpacks stacked outside the destroyed tents. Everyone was packed and ready to go.

Rishika walked over to us with Jay at her side. “Everyone’s ready to go, Greyson.”

Elle looked at Greyson, clearly stricken. “But Greyson, we can’t leave right now. Not yet. What about Helix?”

Greyson heaved a heavy sigh and looked at Rishika. “So, our plans have changed slightly.”

Rishika glanced at Jay. They both looked surprised. “Are we not leaving yet?” she asked Greyson, clearly shocked.

“No, we’re still leaving,” I started. “It’s just that—”

“We have to figure out what’s happening with Helix first,” Greyson finished. “*I* need to figure it out.”

“*Helix?*” Rishika asked, looking even more confused than ever.

Greyson nodded. “We’ll leave after I talk to the council about his case.”

Elle visibly relaxed, and gave a small sigh of relief.

Rishika, on the other hand, did *not* look pleased by this turn of events, but she pressed her lips together and didn’t argue.

“Let’s go,” Greyson said, nodding to Elle and me, and together we headed toward the council tent in the center of the encampment.

When we reached it, Xavier and Ava were just stepping out. I stopped, jarred. No matter how many times I saw them together, it never seemed to get easier. Especially after witnessing the intensity of their connection at Ava’s Luna ceremony. I wasn’t going to forget *that* in a hurry.

Xavier glanced at us. “If you’re here to complain about the Bitterfangs slashing the tents, don’t bother.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “They’re useless,” she said, nodding toward the tent. “No surprises there.”

Before any of us could respond to that, Elle gasped.

“*Helix!*”

She lurched forward, but Greyson grabbed her before she could get far. I followed her line of sight toward the center of the council’s tent where Helix was sitting, hunched over, the silver collar tight around his neck. He looked so miserable and pathetic, it broke my heart.

Xavier looked at me, saw the expression on my face, and glanced at Helix. “Cesaries and a few of the other council members brought him in a few minutes ago. It’s not looking good for him.”

I happened to agree, but I still wished Xavier hadn’t phrased it like that in front of Elle.

“So why are you here?” he asked, looking over at Greyson.

“To talk to the council about Helix,” Greyson said shortly.

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “What? Why? I thought we were supposed to be leaving right about now.”

“We still are going to—this won’t take long. Just make sure your pack is ready,” Greyson said, and walked briskly into the council tent.

I watched as Xavier’s jaw clenched in a familiar way. It looked like he was about to shout something unpleasant at Greyson’s retreating figure, but Ava put her hand on his arm.

“X, don’t,” she said quietly. “It’s not worth it.”

Xavier glowered at Greyson’s back. “You’re right about that,” he muttered, and—taking Ava’s hand—the two of them walked away.

The interaction between them had been small, but so intimate it had just about taken my breath away. Ava was acting like Xavier’s Luna, and he was letting her.

Because Ava *was* his Luna, and that was just the way things were now.

I took a breath and followed Greyson and Elle into the council tent.

Cesaries was inside, in the middle of a whispered conference with the rest of the council. As I moved to Greyson’s side, he was in the process of eyeing the council warily.

“Excuse me,” he said, with barely controlled frustration, “but what have you decided to do with Helix yet?”

Cesaries leaned back and looked up at us, but before he could respond to Greyson’s question, Elle stepped forward.

“Can I talk to Helix?” she asked with shocking politeness.

This seemed to catch Cesaries by surprise. He exchanged an uncertain look with the other councilors. No one said anything in response to Elle. It seemed that no one wanted to answer, one way or the other.

Elle looked around at all of them, and I could see the desperation in her eyes. My heart broke for her.

“She just wants to talk to her friend,” I said. “Elle can’t break the silver collar, so she can’t help him escape or anything. She just wants to speak to him.”

This seemed to persuade Cesaries, and he sighed. “I suppose that would be acceptable.” He looked over at a small man at the end of the tent’s long table. “Perth, you’ll need to keep an eye on them while they talk.”

Before Perth could respond, there was a commotion just outside the tent and we all looked over just in time to see Ethaniel—the Northwind Alpha—storm into the council tent. He was flanked by two members of his pack, and he looked thunderous.

“*More* guests?” Cesaries muttered.

Ethaniel looked around the tent, then zeroed in on Helix, who he eyed with such poisonous hatred that I found myself shrinking back, even though his rage wasn’t directed at me.

“Is it true that this *Rogue* is responsible for Evan’s death?” Ethaniel snarled.

He started toward Helix without waiting for an answer, but Greyson stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

“This is a council matter,” Greyson said evenly.

Ethaniel glared at Greyson, then rounded on Cesaries. “What’s the meaning of this? I demandanswers, Cesaries!”

Cesaries sighed. “This young wolf has confessed to the murder of Evan, but—”

“*What?*” Ethaniel burst out.

“—he claims he was only doing it to protect his sire, Dayton of the Nightshade pack,” Cesaries finished, as though Ethaniel hadn’t spoken.

This bit of information seemed to agitate Ethaniel and the other two Northwind wolves even more.

“Then he has to die!” one of the Northwinds snapped angrily.

“An eye for an eye!” added the other.

My stomach clenched with anxiety. “I thought there was supposed to be some sort of inquiry before a sentence is passed.”

Ethaniel looked me over with utter disdain in his eyes, and I thought of Ava’s comment about the council’s utter uselessness. I had to wonder if Cesaries was going to show any backbone here, or if he was going to give in and just hand Helix over to the Northwind pack—which would amount to a death sentence.

And if that happened, I was extremely worried that Elle would try to stop them.

Cesaries looked past all of us and nodded. I turned to see a guard entering the tent, Dayton and Geena in tow. Dayton clearly hadn’t had time to clean up. He’d pulled on some clothes, but he was still smeared with dirt and blood, and looked pretty rough.

Cesaries looked at him loftily. “We have received reports that you turned this werewolf, and that he was born a true wolf. This is indeed a heinous accusation. Dayton of the Nightshade pack, can you confirm this rumor?”

**Episode 4016**

It was as if all the air in the tent had been sucked out. Every eye in the place turned to Dayton. He rocked back on his heels, looking like he’d just seen a ghost.

Greyson eyed Dayton, then turned to me, then Elle. I could see the question in his eyes without him having to mind link his thoughts, because I was worried about the exact same thing—the council was taking the turning of a true wolf very, *very* seriously. How had Cesaries referred to the idea of it? *A heinous accusation*. That sounded pretty bad.

I knew I needed to play it cool and not look guilty or even particularly nervous, but I couldn’t help shooting a look at Greyson. I was so scared about what this could all mean. Instinctively, I reached out and grabbed his hand, needing the reassurance of his touch.

He seemed to understand, and he squeezed my hand.

Dayton’s shocked expression darkened into a scowl as he faced the council. “Yes, Helix was a wolf before I turned him. So what?”

This did not seem to be the appropriate response. The council murmured among themselves, and Cesaries made a low humming sound in his throat. He turned and bent toward the council members, and they resumed the whispered conversation.

What the hell were they talking about? Were they deciding something?

I thought back to when Greyson had first discussed the possibility of turning Elle and expressed his reservations about doing it. Maybe he’d been right to be so hesitant. Maybe he shouldn’t have done it at all. But no. He’d done it to save the pack. We would’ve been found by LIPS if he hadn’t. In exchange for turning her, Elle’s wolf pack had led LIPS away from the Redwoods. Would the council take that into consideration if Elle were found out?

Cesaries turned back toward us, looking deadly serious. “This was obviously an unstable turning. It is dangerous for the future of all werewolves to have such a wolf running among us. Not to mention the fact that he has killed at the summit, which is explicitly against our rules.” He shook his head. “A turning such as this has not been recorded for generations.”

Perth cleared his throat. “There’s an old story about Luka and Cinder, an Alpha and Luna from the old times. They lost their youngest son to a pack of true wolves. They were so grief-stricken that Luka turned a true wolf, hoping to create a bond between true wolves and werewolves. He and Cinder hoped it would prevent such a tragedy from ever occurring again.”

Cesaries nodded. “It was a noble idea…” He trailed off, probably for theatrical effect.

I stared at him, rapt. “Well? If it was so noble, then… Did it work?”

Cesaries met my eyes. “One day, the turned wolf overheard a family argument between Luka and Cinder. Nothing too bad, or even out of the ordinary, but the turned wolf was too foreign to the ways of humanity to know any better, and he believed that his sire was being attacked. He slaughtered the Luna Cinder and all their children.”

I gasped, and a shiver of fear ran down my spine. “That’s awful.”

“Yes, it truly is a horrible tale, isn’t it?” Cesaries sighed. “Ever since then, there have been similar tales, all of them ending in tragedy. So, while there has never been an official law against turning true wolves, we have now decided that there is an obvious need for one. Over the course of our history, it has been made clear that a turned true wolf reacts to the sire bond very differently than a turned human, and that makes turned wolves dangerous.” Cesaries looked around. “As such, we decree that no true wolf will be turned from here on out. And if it is ever discovered that a true wolf *has* been turned, both that wolf and their sire will be disposed of.”

Elle cried out and rushed to Helix, clutching him to her. “No! You can’t do this! That isn’t fair!”

Cesaries looked at Dayton. “And as for you…” He gestured at the guard, who stepped forward and grabbed Dayton roughly.

Dayton’s eyes went wide with anger and fear as he struggled. “*What?* *No!* How was I to know what would happen? Your law didn’t even exist when I turned him! You just came up with it!”

Geena rushed forward. “What are you doing? You can’t do this! I won’t let you. You will *not* kill my mate!”

Everyone started to talk at once.

*What’s going to happen to you?* I asked Greyson fearfully. *And to Elle*?  
 *Nothing*, he said quickly. *They don’t have any proof about me and Elle right now. If no one says anything, then nothing will happen.*

I was terrified. *But if they find out, they’ll kill you!* *Greyson, we have to—*

“ENOUGH!” Cesaries bellowed, glaring at the lot of us. He narrowed his eyes at Geena. “Surely you realize why we need to make an example of your mate?”

She was breathless. “He’ll never do it again, I promise you. Let my Alpha speak to others about the new law—to pass on his experience and explain why turning a true wolf should never be done. If you kill him, you’ll be losing that opportunity!”

“But we will gain wolves who fear the punishment of death,” Cesaries said simply.

Tears were coursing down Geena’s face, and my heart ached for her.

“*Please*,” she said. “You’ve only just created the law. I understand punishing someone for this in the future, when they break the law, but there was nothing to stop us before. He was only trying to do a good thing, a good thing that’s taken such a horrendous turn. *Please.* Dayton broke no law!”

Cesaries seemed to think this over for a moment, then he gestured for the guard to release Dayton. “Your point is a good one, Luna. Alpha Dayton will be the law’s only exception—*if* he swears to speak to others about this law and repent his choice.”

Geena nodded rapidly. “Yes, yes, he will!” she gushed.

Cesaries nodded. “Fine. But we will be watching, Luna. And if we discover that you have been foolish and turned any other true wolf—in the future or in the past—then your stay of execution will be canceled. Do I make myself clear?”

Both Geena and Dayton nodded wordlessly.

“But what about Helix?” Elle demanded. “What will happen to him? He was turned before your law, too. He is innocent of any wrongdoing, just like Dayton. Can’t he be pardoned, too?”

I balled my hands into fists. I wanted Elle to *stop* *talking*. She was drawing too much attention to herself, and I was terrified that the council was going to start asking questions—like *why* Elle cared so much about Helix. If we had to explain that Elle and Helix had been pack mates when they were just wolf pups, then we were all going to be in some very hot water. Especially now that Cesaries had said Dayton would be the *only* exception to the new law.

My heart beat painfully fast, just imagining the council coming down on Greyson and trying to punish him for turning Elle.

Cesaries was shaking his head. “This Rogue wolf has attacked wolves at this summit and has admitted to murder. He is a clear and present danger to us all. We have no choice—we cannot let a werewolf like him go free.”

Elle gave a choked sob and held onto Helix, who looked down at the ground, his face devoid of emotion. It was as though he couldn’t hear what was going on around him, or had completely checked out of reality. It was terrifying to see.

Cesaries turned to Dayton. “Since you are his sire, the council will give you the honor of executing this wolf. And though he is only a Rogue, he is still a werewolf—you must make it an honorable death.”

Dayton looked shaken by this, and Elle opened her mouth to protest, but Greyson stepped forward and grabbed her shoulder, stopping her before she could say anything. He dragged her to her feet and away from Helix.

I looked around, as scared as I’d ever been in my life. I wanted to believe Greyson’s assertion that no one in the council knew the truth about Elle’s past, and as long as it stayed that way, they’d both be safe, but I couldn’t stop myself from feeling panicked.

Perth leaned over to Cesaries and whispered something I couldn’t hear.

Cesaries listened for a moment, then nodded. “Ah, yes—the murdered wolf *did* belong to the Northwind pack, that’s true…” He listened for a moment longer. “Yes. The Northwind may wish to be the executioners of this Rogue wolf, to personally deliver justice for their fallen pack member.”

Ethaniel—who’d been watching the proceedings—stepped forward. “*Yes!* That *is* what we want. I’ll gladly execute the Rogue.”

**Episode 4017**

Elle’s eyes went wild—she looked almost rabid—and Greyson tightened his grip on her arm before she could do something truly desperate.

I stared around, horrified. What the hell was going on? Were they seriously going to kill Helix? Now? Just like that?

“You can’t kill him,” I said, trying to appeal to Cesaries. “Elle is right. Everything Geena just said about Dayton applies to Helix, too. He wasn’t acting of his own free will when he killed Evan. He’s being controlled by sire bond—he wouldn’t have killed anyone without it. What about that?” I demanded. “Doesn’t that mean *anything*?”  
 Cesaries looked at me, his expression as dark as the night outside. “The decision has been made, Luna Hart. We will hear no more about it. The case is closed.” He looked at Greyson. “You would do well to teach your Luna to hold her tongue, Alpha Evers—”

“*Never*,” Greyson snarled. “Cali is right. This is a double standard—”

“You didn’t have a pack member *die* because of him,” Ethanial growled, taking a step forward. He nodded toward Cesaries. “Like the councilor said, *the decision’s been made*. The Rogue dies.”

I was ready to argue more, but Cesaries spoke first.

“Excellent,” he said, sounding almost cheerful. “It will be done first thing in the morning. I’m sure we’re all anxious for this unpleasantness to be over, and we don’t want to let this ruin the last day of the summit for us, do we?” He looked around, his face bright once again. “Now that we have all that nasty business out of the way, we should all return to the party. The Alpha and Luna of the Samara pack have much to celebrate, and we should join them. I’m sure it’s almost time for the consummation, too, and that will surely inspire others.”

*Consummation?* I had a visceral reaction to the word, and hearing it nearly made me gag. I seriously doubted that Xavier and Ava had waited to consummate *anything*. Or if they had, and were called on to do it now, they’d probably be really, really good at it, what with all their practice. Xavier claimed to have been fucking Ava this entire time, after all.

Anyway, I was pretty sure I’d have pass on attending whatever the hell the *consummation* was. God, this night was just refusing to let up…

I looked over at Elle. Silent tears were streaming down her face. Helix was still staring at the ground, so still and quiet that he might as well have been unconscious. I had no idea what the hell we were going to do to help him, or even if there *was* anything we could do.

I felt completely useless.

“Take the prisoner back to his cell and stand watch,” Cesaries said to the guard as he and the rest of the council got to their feet and left the tent.

The guard nodded and pulled Helix to his feet, then led him out, likely to the holding area where Knox had been kept before his trial. The other guard ushered the rest of us out of the tent without a word.

As soon as we were outside, I turned to Greyson, but Elle spoke before I could say a word.

“We can’t let them do this to Helix!” she burst out.

“There’s nothing I can do about it now, Elle,” Greyson said darkly. “You heard what they said in there just as well as I did—the council has made its decision.”

Elle looked shaken to her core. “But you know what will happen, Greyson. The Northwind will *torture* him to death. Whatever they do to Helix, it won’t be quick, and it won’t be merciful. You can’t abandon him to that!”

Greyson rubbed his forehead. “Even if that were true—”

“*It is!*” Elle insisted.

“Even if you’re right, I don’t know if there’s anything I can do about it,” Greyson said. “We have to be careful, Elle. We’re on thin ice here, and we still have the Bitterfangs to worry about. They are going to make a move on us. It’s just inevitable at this point, and when they do it’s going to impact a lot more people.”

I glanced between them, torn. On the one hand, I agreed with Elle. The Northwinds were *pissed*, and I truly doubted they’d give Helix a merciful death. But Greyson was right about needing to be careful about what we said and did and the threats that faced the pack.

Elle turned on her heel and walked away, back toward the Redwood camp. It was clear she was pissed off, but there wasn’t much I could do about it, or anyone else for that matter. I stepped in front of Greyson before he could follow her.

“Are you sure you can’t try to talk to the council again?” I asked quietly. “Try to reason with them? You know this isn’t all Helix’s fault. Dayton turned him, and then just left him alone to fend for himself. Helix had no guidance after he was turned. Maybe that would’ve changed the outcome of all of this.”

I remembered how feral Elle had been when she’d first joined us, but the whole pack had been there for her—to guide her with the ways of human life and help her and keep her in check when needed. Most of my sympathy for Helix probably stemmed from the fact that I knew that Elle could easily have ended up in his place if the Redwoods hadn’t been there for her. If Greyson hadn’t.

“Helix went Rogue too soon,” I said, shaking my head. “He never had a chance.”

Greyson heaved a heavy sigh. “I know.” He passed a hand over his eyes. “I’d better go find Elle.”

We headed back toward our campsite, but found Elle before we could reach it. She was just off the main path, slumped against an aspen tree, curled in on herself and sobbing like her heart was breaking.

And my heart broke right along with it.

I turned to Greyson and pulled him aside. “Greyson, please, listen to me. If anyone could convince them to save Helix, it’s you. You’re a respected Alpha. They’ll have to listen to what you say.”

He looked down at me, then over at Elle. He shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know if it would do any good. You heard what they said. The case is closed.”

But he spoke without his usual conviction, and I knew he wasn’t so sure. I also knew that he was torn about what to do. I could see it in his stormy grey eyes.

I reached up and cupped his chin, making him look at me. “I have faith in you, Greyson. You’ve always been good at talking people round. I’ve seen you rally the pack time and time again, even when everything seems hopeless. You are a natural-born Alpha. People want to listen when you speak, and they want to follow where you lead.”

“This is a very complicated situation,” he said softly. “It’s easier for Cesaries to simply eliminate the problem. To eliminate Helix.”

I flinched when he said that but shook it off.

“Helix isn’t a problem, Greyson.” I turned his face so that he was looking at Elle, who was sobbing so hard she was shaking. “She is crying because Helix is a *person*, and someone she cares about. Dayton was sentenced to the same fate, but Geena was able to save him because she fought for him. You at least have to try, Greyson.” I gave him a hard look. “You owe it to Elle.”

Greyson hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “You’re right. I’ll try. I don’t know if it will do any good at all, but I’ll try. I’ll talk to Cesaries.”

He looked at Elle for a moment longer, and I guessed what he was thinking.

“I’ll take care of her. She needs a friend right now. But you go,” I said, giving him a push. “Go find Cesaries. You can do it, Greyson; I know you can.”

He nodded and turned away, striding back the way we’d come.

With a sigh, I looked over at Elle, who was still sitting beneath the tree.

“Elle,” I said, crouching next to her and putting my arms around her. “I’m so sorry.”

She turned and threw herself at me, sobbing into my shoulder. “How could they do this?” she wailed. “How could they not listen? How could they just kill him like this?”

I’m so sorry,” I said, gently patting her back. “I don’t know. But listen, Greyson is going to go talk to them. To Cesaries. He’s going to try to get them to listen.”

Elle gasped. She leaned back and stared at me, wiping tears from her eyes. “Really? He went back to talk to them?”

I nodded. “Yeah, just now.”

Elle’s eyes widened. “Can you help me see him?”

I frowned at her. “What?”

“Helix,” she said urgently. “Please, Cali, will you help me? I need to get to him. Tonight.”

**Episode 4018**

**Xavier**

When I saw my brother walking down the path toward the council tent, I headed toward him. I had questions, and I figured this was my chance to finally get some answers.

“Greyson!” I called, catching up with him.

He glanced at me but didn’t stop. “Not now, Xavier.”

I gritted my teeth at his dismissive tone and stepped in front of him, blocking his path. “Hey, what the hell are you doing, man? What’s the plan? Are we leaving tonight or not? An hour ago, you were shitting bricks about making sure everyone was ready to go, so are we going or not?”

He let out a frustrated breath, and I raised my eyebrows. If he was annoyed, then he could join the fucking club.

“We’re not going, are we?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. I shook my head, anger clawing at my chest. “God, this is so typical, Greyson. It was *your* idea to leave in this big hurry, man. Then we all decided to do as you asked, but now we’re being forced to stick around in a dangerous situation because of this situation with Elle and some rando who’s not even in your pack? What the hell, Greyson? The guy’s a fucking Rogue, and he murdered a Northwind wolf—that’s a pack we were hopingwould join the alliance, in case you forgot—”

“I didn’t forget,” Greyson growled. “But you don’t understand.”

“*What* don’t I understand?” I snapped.

He glanced around. “If they find out I turned Elle, they’ll kill us both,” he said, lowering his voice.

I took this in. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have turned her.”

He glared at me. “You know exactly why I had to do it.”

When I just shrugged, he shook his head angrily and pushed past me.

“Just leave me alone,” he said. “I need to talk to the council.”

I let out a mirthless laugh. “So what? We just wait around for you?”

Greyson’s jaw clenched. “Just stay out of my way, Xavier,” he muttered as he disappeared into the council tent.

I stared after him for just a moment, then turned and strode back toward my own camp. This was *such* a Greyson move. Leave it to my brother not to follow through on his *own* fucking plan. I should have seen this coming.

When I reached the Samara camp, Knox popped up in front of my face, like a tiny, annoying jack-in-the-box.

“So?” he demanded.

“So *what*?” I snapped, brushing past him.

“Are we leaving?” he asked, running after me.

I squeezed my eyes shut as a tension headache crawled its way up the back of my skull. I didn’t have the time, interest, or obligation to deal with Knox.

“It’s not time yet,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’ll let you know.”

“Are you serious?” Knox said in disbelief. “At least when I was Alpha, I actually made decisions—”

*Enough.*

I spun around and grabbed Knox by the throat, lifting him so fast and so high his toes barely brushed the frozen ground as he gasped for breath.

“Do you seriously want to do this, Knox?” I demanded. “Do you want to fuck with me right now? *Right now?* Really think about it, shrimp.”

Knox flailed, clawing uselessly at my hand on his neck, but he couldn’t say a word—not with my hand cutting off his oxygen supply.

“*Xavier! Knox!*” Catching sight of us, Ava sprinted over. “Okay, everyone just calm down,” she said, trying to make her voice soothing—and failing. “Just calm the *fuck* down!”

I didn’t move until Ava yanked hard enough on my arm that I looked over at her.

Her eyes looked like liquid darkness. “Please, X,” she said quietly.

Fuck Ava and those eyes. Like I could ever say no to her.

“Fine,” I muttered, and let Knox go.

With a raspy grunt, he dropped like a rock. He lay crumpled on the ground, his hands at his throat, gasping for breath.

“*Don’t fucking test me*,” I growled at him. Then I turned and stormed off into the trees.

I laced my fingers behind my neck as I walked. I needed to blow off some steam—alone. I was just so fucking pissed—about everything. Especially about being told to wait. I was a fucking *Alpha*, and Greyson was still managing to find ways to tell me what to do like a bossy older brother. I had my own pack and somehow, I still felt like I wasn’t able to do anything. Not for my pack, and not for anyone I cared about.

With a sigh, I dropped down to crouch in front of a tree and rubbed my forehead, where the headache had settled. The moment I stopped moving, I realized how freaking exhausted I was. I blew out a breath. I’d never thought that being Alpha would be easy, but tonight had been a real test.

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

“Xavier?”

I sat up and looked around. I wasn’t in the woods anymore—I was in my room at the Redwood pack house. The door opened, and Cali walked in.

She smiled when she saw me. “There you are,” she said, laughing. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

I stared at her blankly. “What?”

She shook her head and walked over to the bed. “I guess last night was a really long one.” She sat down next to me. “I didn’t mean to keep you up so late,” she said, giving me a sidelong glance that made my pulse race.

Heat flooded through me. “Oh. Well, I didn’t mind.”

Cali laughed again. “I didn’t seem like you did. And it was a lot of fun.” She leaned close to me, only stopping when her lips were a millimeter away from mine. “Maybe I should remind you how much.”

A wave of love swept over me, and I acted without thinking—I put my arms around her and pulled her close, pressing her body against mine. She let out a wild laugh as I rolled her underneath me and hovered over her. I pressed a kiss to her lips, and she responded, tangling her tongue with mine. My whole body responded. Everything felt so… *right*—to have her in my arms, to feel her skin against my skin…

I let myself sink into the kiss, deepening it as my blood rerouted southward.

I coaxed her mouth open, reveling in the taste of her. She sighed, opening to me, and I cradled the back of her head to keep her locked in. Cali reached down and tugged at the hem of my shirt, trying to pull it upward and off. But I stopped her. I pulled out of the kiss and leaned back, cupping her face in my hands, and just looked down at her.

She looked up at me, startled. “What is it, Xavier?”

“Nothing,” I said, rubbing her cheeks with my thumbs. “I just want to look at you.”

She smiled. “Why now?”

“I just want to see you, like this. In my bed, in my arms. I want to remember you like this—in this moment.”

She laughed, but her brow furrowed even as she smiled. “What are you talking about? You’re acting like you haven’t seen me in weeks. Or like you’re going somewhere.”

I frowned. Something in her words struck a tender spot in my memory, but I couldn’t remember what it was.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I shook my head, pushing the painful feeling away—it was too unpleasant to dwell on. I just wanted to stay in this moment with Cali. “Nothing. I just really love you, Cali. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I’d do anything for you, baby,” I said. “I’d die for you.”

She reached up and gently trailed her fingers down my cheek. “I know that. But I don’t want that, Xavier. I would never want you to die for me.”

My head started to hurt. “There are worse things than dying.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could think about them—I hadn’t meant to say them, and I almost wished I could reach out and snatch them back.

Cali’s expression darkened, and the last trace of her smile disappeared. “What does that mean?” When I didn’t answer, her frown deepened. “Xavier? Are you okay?”

I tried to nod, but the pain in my head had gotten worse, and my body felt stiff, like it was resisting me. Almost like it wasn’t my own.

“Xavier?” Cali asked, her voice rising in panic.

I wanted to say something—to reassure her that everything was fine, but I couldn’t open my mouth. I couldn’t do anything.

Then my hands began to move. They had been gently framing Cali’s face, but now, they were moving lower. Terror filled me when I realized that I wasn’t controlling them, and that I couldn’t stop them as they wrapped around her throat.

**Episode 4019**

**Greyson**

When I got back to the council tent, I was frustrated to find that it was completely empty. I’d seen Cesaries leave, but I’d figured that someone might have stuck around—Perth, maybe. But there was no one there.

“Shit,” I muttered.

I looked around, quickly thinking about what my next step should be. I really didn’t have time to go hunt down Cesaries, but what choice did I have? I’d promised Cali that I’d try to talk to the council, and I wasn’t about to go back on my word. Especially not when I knew that Elle was counting on me to try.

I pushed a hand through my hair, feeling exhausted and wishing that I felt more optimistic about my chances of changing Cesaries’s mind about Helix. I’d promised Cali that I would try, but—if I was being honest—I thought it was a lost cause, and that even asking was a total waste of time. Worse than that, it was a dangerous risk.

I looked over my shoulder at the path, where I’d just spoken to Xavier. His impatience about the delay in leaving was annoying—because it was coming from Xavier—but I had to admit that it was justified. It *had* been my idea to leave, and I *had* been insistent that everyone get ready, but now it was a “hurry up and wait”situation. I’d probably have been annoyed myself, in Xavier’s position. The alliance did need to get back to familiar territory and start preparing for what could turn out to be a war.

“*Shit*,” I said again.

I looked around, thinking hard, and remembered that Cesaries had mentioned going back to the celebration for Xavier and Ava. That was somewhere to start looking, at least.

Leaving the council tent, I headed for the bonfire, wondering how much celebration could really be going on. Xavier had headed back toward the Samara campsite, which meant that he and Ava weren’t even *at* the party—and if they weren’t there, I had to wonder if their absence would draw suspicion.

But when I got to the bonfire, I was surprised to see that there were plenty of wolves partying, every one of them with a drink in their hand.

Rolling my eyes, I scanned the crowd for Cesaries. As I searched, my thoughts went to the new law he’d made about turning natural wolves.

If the council were to find out about Elle…

*No.* I had to stop thinking about that. I couldn’t go down that road. Not now.

The truth of the matter was that no one knew about me turning Elle except for a select few, and there was nothing in it for those people to reveal what they knew. If I didn’t reveal anything, then no one else would. Ultimately, I was going to Cesaries again for Elle—I had to show her that I had her back. Maybe that was the only way to prevent what was happening to Helix from happening to her.

I finally spotted Cesaries on the far side of the bonfire. He’d made things seem pretty closed, so I didn’t really know how this was going to go. If he dismissed me outright, I couldn’t blame him, but I’d come this far, hadn’t I? I’d already put us leaving on hold for this. I had to just finish it.

As I approached, I saw that he was speaking to Wade, from the Ironwood pack. I wasn’t about to discuss Helix in front of anyone else, so I held back for a moment, then moved in.

“Excuse me, sorry for interrupting,” I said, nodding at Wade. “Cesaries, could I speak to you alone?”

The elder gave me a keen look. “Alpha Evers. If it is council business you wish to discuss, then you can do so here.”

I felt a muscle twitch in my jaw. “It’s a sensitive matter. I’d prefer to speak to you in private.”

Cesaries didn’t look pleased. “Will you excuse us?” he said, glancing up at Wade.

Wade nodded as Cesaries and I walked a little ways away from the revelers.

Cesaries looked around. “I haven’t seen the Samara Alpha and his new Luna.” He grinned at me and raised his eyebrows suggestively. “I suspect they’re hoping to take advantage of the Wolf Moon.”

My stomach turned, but I fought to keep my expression neutral.

“With any luck we’ll be celebrating the birth of a new pup in a few months,” Cesaries continued. “Ava seems like a very fertile Luna, wouldn’t you say?”

He seemed to want a response to the question, but it was all I could do not to shudder. I gritted my teeth and tried to purge the image he’d summoned from my mind. The last thing I wanted to do was chat with Cesaries about my brother getting Ava pregnant.

When we were out of earshot of the rest of the party, I stopped and looked around, then turned to Cesaries.

“I’ve come to ask you to reconsider the fate of the Rogue, Helix.”

Cesaries’s expression darkened, and he waved a dismissive hand. “I was afraid this is what you wished to discuss. As I already said, the council has made its decision. The matter is closed. Besides, the Rogue confessed to the murder. What other evidence is needed—”

“But what if Helix *wasn’t* responsible?” I asked hotly.

Cesaries raised an incredulous brow. “Are you saying he wasn’t acting alone?”

I took a deep breath. I hated to bring it up, but I was out of options. “He was being driven by the sire bond.”

Cesaries looked vaguely disappointed. “Yes, yes, that’s already been established.”

“I know,” I said. “The point is that Helix shouldn’t be held responsible for his actions. He was unable to stop himself. You yourself admitted that the sire bond is dangerous,” I reminded Cesaries. “None of what happened is Helix’s fault.”

The council elder gave me a long, searching look. “Are you suggesting that Helix is the real victim here, Alpha Evers? Because I’ll tell you, the Northwind pack might take issue with that stance.”

I sighed. “I’d be willing to talk to Ethaniel—work things out with him. I think we could agree on a suitable punishment for Helix that isn’t death.”

Cesaries was quiet, and seemed to be pondering what I’d said.

“You make a compelling argument, Alpha Evers,” he finally conceded.

This surprised me, and my hope lifted for a moment, but it immediately fell again when he pivoted to another subject.

“I notice that you and your mate both seem to have a strange fixation on the sire bond.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, making sure to keep my voice even.

Cesaries tipped his head, looking at me closely. “Your Luna came to me recently to ask about the sire bond. Did you know that? I found it particularly interesting that someone who had never been turned would have so many questions about such a bond.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “Perhaps that should tell you something.”

I stared at him, baffled. I wasn’t sure what he was saying. “Tell me what?”

“A true Luna—one able to carry the responsibility of a pack—needs to be strong.”

My eyes narrowed. “What are you saying?”

He sighed. “Your Luna should be a wolf. Why haven’t you turned your mate, Alpha Evers?”

I stared at him, shocked.

“I don’t know why that matters,” I said stiffly. I wanted to add that I didn’t know why he thought it was any of his business, but I was smart enough to keep that to myself.

“Of course it matters,” Cesaries said hotly.

The man’s hand started to feel heavy on my shoulder, and I felt myself tense against it. Cesaries had made it pretty clear that he’d pressured Xavier into making Ava his Luna. I wasn’t about to let him pressure me into turning Cali.

“That decision is between me and my mate,” I said stiffly.

Cesaries looked irritated and didn’t bother to hide it. “Ahh, well then, it seems I misunderstood.” His expression darkened. “But I can’t help but wonder, Greyson—did you know about Dayton and Helix?

“*What?*” I asked, shock jolting through me. I hadn’t been expecting that question.

Cesaries’s gaze sharpened. “Dayton and Helix. The sire bond. Did the Redwood pack know about the murder? Or about Helix, and his sire bond with Dayton? Because if so, that means you chose not to report it to the council.”

Cesaries was looking right at me, and I had to force myself to maintain eye contact. I couldn’t let myself look away as I lied to his face.

“Of course not,” I said. “We only found out moments before you did.”

I held my breath, hoping to hell Cesaries believed me.

There was a suspended moment when the councilor didn’t say anything, but he searched my face. Then—finally—he nodded.

“Of course. I’m going back to the party.” He started to turn away.

“What about Helix?” I said, stopping him before he could leave.

“What?”

“Helix,” I pressed. “The Rogue. Will you spare his life?”

**Episode 4020**

I moved through the campsite with Elle at my side, keeping my eyes open, anxious that someone might catch sight of us on the way to where they were holding Helix. I knew I’d pissed off Cesaries by talking back about Helix’s sentence, and I’d certainly heard what he’d said to Greyson about keeping me in line.

I couldn’t help but smile to myself when I remembered how Greyson had responded to that.

*Never.*

I loved that he’d defended me like that, and thinking about it gave me a surge of confidence—and of attraction to him. Greyson believed in me in the same way that I believed in him, and that meant a lot. And what I’d said to him was true—if anyone could save Helix, it really was him.

Elle had moved ahead of me, and I hurried to catch up. She was moving fast. I knew I was going to have to tell Greyson about this, but for the time being, I was just going along with it. I had to. I’d told Greyson that I’d keep an eye on Elle, and I had no doubt that Elle would sneak off on her own if I didn’t keep up. At least this way, I could try to keep her in line if someone caught us. The last thing I wanted was for her to accidentally tell someone about the nature of her relationship with Greyson. I had to protect Greyson—and Elle—at all costs.

Beyond that, I really felt for Elle. I understood why she wanted to talk to her friend. If Helix was going to die, she deserved a chance to say goodbye.

My heart ached. I just felt so bad about the whole situation. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what I would do if it were Lola in Helix’s place—but I knew I’d have to say goodbye to my best friend. So this was the least I could do for Elle—along with keeping her from creating any more trouble.

I followed her as we approached the council tent. I assumed we were going to the council’s holding cells, but I had no idea where they were.

“Is this the right way?” I whispered to Elle.

She nodded.

“You’re certain?”

“I can smell Helix’s scent,” she assured me. “They took him this way. I’m sure of it.”

“Okay,” I said, not feeling sure at all. “Lead the way.”

She took a few more steps, then stopped so suddenly I bumped into her back.

“*Elle!*” I whisper-shouted.

“Sorry,” she whispered back, then pointed right. “This way.”

We kept moving. We were being as quiet as possible, but the tents around us were quiet as well. Eerily quiet. In the distance, I could still hear what sounded like a party, but it was faint and very far away.

After a moment, Elle glanced at me. “Thank you for coming with me, Cali.”

“Of course,” I said, startled.

“You are one of the people in the pack I trust the most,” she added.

“Oh, that’s nice—”

“I’m not sure that Greyson would have come with me,” Elle said. She shook her head. “Or even allowed me to go.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Elle certainly wasn’t wrong about that, but I wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing, either.

I cleared my throat. “Greyson wants to protect you, Elle, and he wants to keep the pack safe, too. It’s a lot to balance, and that’s why he does the things he does.”

Elle nodded. “I understand, but Helix was my pack—before. Greyson has to understand that.”

“I think he does. And don’t forget, he’s talking to the council about Helix right now. Things could turn out okay,” I said, worried even as I said it that I could be overpromising.

Elle seemed to be thinking the same thing, and when she looked at me, her expression was grave. “You heard how they spoke about Helix. Like he was a dog, or something worse. They think he’s horrible. Dangerous—” Her voice broke and she looked away as tears filled her eyes again.

I reached for her hand and gave it what I hoped was a reassuring squeeze.

Elle took a shuddering breath. “I just don’t want him to be in pain,” she said quietly.

“Me neither,” I said. I gave her hand another squeeze, then let it go.

Elle nodded, and we kept walking through a grove of thin aspens.

“Elle, stop!” I hissed, grabbing her hand and pulling her back.

There was a small building in a clearing up ahead—about the size of a garden shed, except it looked like it was on stilts. As we approached, two council guards emerged from inside, closing the door behind them.

“That’s the guard who took Helix,” I whispered as I pulled Elle down to crouch behind a stand of bushes. “Helix must be in that shed.”

Elle nodded, watching carefully as the guards locked the door.

“I hope they didn’t eat all the food,” one of them said. “I want some of those mashed potatoes.”

“Let’s just make this fast,” the other said. “Cesaries won’t want us gone for long.”

“What the old man doesn’t know won’t kill him.”

We waited quietly in the underbrush as the guards walked away. I held my breath, hoping the wind would stay in our favor. Elle was still, but I kept my hand on her arm anyway, holding her in place just in case she tried to make a run for it.

While we waited, I studied her profile, wondering about this young woman I both knew and didn’t know at all. She was a lot of things: fierce, outspoken, and extremely loyal. I thought about Helix, and whether Greyson and Elle’s sire bond would ever drive them to do the things he’d done.

I tried to imagine Elle killing someone just because they’d annoyed Greyson and flinched at the thought. The very idea was just completely alien to Greyson’s nature—and Elle’s. But maybe the sire bond’s insane version of loyalty wasn’t something that necessarily happened all at once. Maybe it was something that could gradually develop, the way Lucian, and even Cesaries, had implied that it would.

The guards drew closer, and closer… And then walked right by us without a second glance. I let out a long breath.

When they disappeared into the darkness, I finally let Elle stand, and she broke away from me.

“*Wait!*” I hissed, hustling after her.

“Come *on*!” she urged, not slowing down. She got to the shed—though I had to acknowledge that the shed was actually a holding cell, as horrifying as that was to contemplate—and sniffed around, then nodded. “He’s here. He’s definitely here. I can smell him. I’m going to go inside.”

I looked at the heavy padlock on the door. “Um, okay. *How*, exactly? Can you pick the lock?”  
 Elle looked confused. “What is ‘pick the lock’?”

“So probably not that.” I sighed. “Are you going to break the lock somehow? It looks pretty secure.”

Elle shook her head and pointed upward. I followed her finger but didn’t see anything.

“What am I looking at?” There was a very small window very high on the back wall, but that couldn’t be what Elle was pointing to. Could it?

Apparently, it could.

“Boost me up there,” she commanded me.

“*Elle*,” I said, in a pleading tone. “I’m not the strongest Redwood pack member.”

“Come on, Cali,” she cajoled. “I’m light. You can do it.”

I sighed. “I’ll try.”

I walked to the back of the shed and positioned myself below the window, then bent my knees so that Elle could climb onto my back, then my shoulders.

“Watch it,” I said, giggling, as she almost stepped onto my ear.

“Can you move closer?” Elle whispered.

I was reaching the point where everything seemed absurd and funny, and I tried not to laugh as I answered. “I’m flattered that you think I’m this strong, Elle, but I don’t know.”

“Try,” she urged.

I took an unsteady step and managed to get close enough to the shed for Elle to reach for the windowsill.

“*Elle!*” I gasped, as her weight shifted and she was no longer on my shoulders.

Suddenly unsteady without her weight, I fell to the ground. I looked up and saw her dangling there. Just as I was sure she was going to topple over, she grabbed the windowsill and pulled herself through the tiny window.

*Phew.*

“Ow,” I muttered, rubbing my hip.

I looked up and saw Elle’s feet disappear through the window. Moments later, I heard her drop to the floor inside with a grunt. She was inside.

With a sigh, I stood and turned around to keep watch. Those guards probably wouldn’t be gone long. I’d stopped giggling from my fall and was feeling nervous again, now that I was alone. What the hell was going to happen now?

I shook my head. Had coming here been a huge mistake?

# **Episode 4021**

**Elle**

I rose from my crouched position on the floor of the cell. It was very dark, with only the smallest amount of light shining in from the window I’d just climbed through. It was like the cell itself absorbed all the light.

Slowly, my eyes adjusted, and I looked around the cramped space. This was where they’d put Helix. Where Greyson had said I should be grateful they hadn’t put me. Guilt and doubt nagged at me. Was I going too far? Should I just listen to Cali and trust that Greyson would handle this? Cali had said that Greyson was only trying to protect me, and I believed her. He’d protected me from all sorts of things since the day he’d changed me and I’d become a member of the Redwood pack.

My doubt wasn’t about Greyson. It was about Cesaries and the rest of the council. I doubted that they would show Helix any mercy. And no matter the risk, I couldn’t just leave him to suffer alone.

I looked around the dark cell. *He shouldn’t be in here. It’s not fair.*

I would’ve expected Greyson of all people to understand why I was doing this. It was like I’d tried to explain to Cali—Helix was part of my former pack. Just because I was a werewolf now and part of the Redwood pack, didn’t mean Helix wasn’t important to me anymore. I would always care about him and want to protect him.

I thought about how Xavier had seemingly just walked away from Cali and the Redwood pack. *How could he do that? Just leave everyone behind?* Helix wasn’t even my mate, but I still felt a strong connection to him that I’d carry with me for the rest of my life.

Maybe Xavier didn’t care about any of the Redwoods, then. Or, at least, not as much as I’d assumed. Cali was his mate, but he’d still walked away from her and chosen someone else. He didn’t seem to care about her at all now.

*Is it possible to just ignore a bond like that?*

None of it made any sense to me.

I knew how I felt about Lucian. It was complicated, yes, and confusing, but there was no denying the bond between us. It was a strong connection—or an attraction, as Cali and Lola had told me initially. It wasn’t unpleasant. It was actually the opposite of unpleasant. But it was confusing, because I felt like I had a bond with Greyson as well. A strong one. One that I knew I wasn’t supposed to feel.

Greyson was Cali’s mate.

And any time Greyson sparked those feelings in me, I felt ashamed. He was my *Alpha*. My superior. Not my *mate*.

Why couldn’t I just get that through my head?

And hopefully, when everything was said and done, he’d forgive me for disobeying him. I cared about Greyson, about the Redwoods, but I wasn’t going to leave Helix behind. I couldn’t.

Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I was able to make out Helix, naked in his human form, curled up in the corner of the cell. He was shackled to the floor and didn’t even bother to look up, though he’d probably known I was there from the moment I’d dropped into his cell.

“Helix?” I whispered.

He twitched at the sound of his name, but still didn’t look up.

“Helix, it’s me. It’s Elle.”

Finally, he looked up at me, his eyes looking wild and pained. My gaze snagged on the silver cuffs, chafing at his wrists with each moment. Beneath them, his skin was an angry shade of red.

“Helix?” I dared to step closer, and he lunged at me, trying to swipe at me until the cuffs jerked him back and he yelped in pain.

I froze, not daring to move any closer, my eyes wide. I’d never seen him like this before, and I’d known him almost my entire life. Growing up together, he’d always been so playful, so friendly. He’d always had a good spirit, and seeing that spirit broken like this was devastating. This wasn’t him at all.

I wasn’t prepared for the guilt that crashed into me. He’d chosen to become a werewolf because of me. He’d followed in my footsteps, and look where it had led him. Tears stung my eyes as I looked at my friend.

Sometimes, I missed being just a wolf. Becoming a werewolf had opened up an entirely new world to me, one I loved, but human emotions were complicated. Things had been so much simpler when I was just a wolf. When my only pack had been the one I was born into. When tensions and threats and pack matters had had straightforward solutions. Though I’d come a long way since the night Greyson turned me, I was still struggling to navigate the human world, with its many rules and feelings.

And clearly, I wasn’t the only one.

I took another step forward, stopping when I was just out of reach. Helix couldn’t hurt me where I was standing, but I hoped he wouldn’t lunge again and hurt *himself*.

“Helix, please. I’m here to help you.”

His body went limp, and he flopped down onto the stone floor, his chains clinking. “Just leave,” he begged. His voice was pained and tears shone in his eyes, even in the darkness of his cell. “You can’t do anything for me.”

Once, when we were young wolves, we’d been following our pack through the woods, along the edge of a river. I’d strayed a little too close to the river’s edge and had started to slip down the muddy bank. I would’ve fallen into the river and probably drowned if Helix hadn’t grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and hauled me up.

He’d saved my life then. Now, it was my turn to save his.

“That’s not true,” I insisted. “Greyson went to speak with the council.”

He let out a huff of a laugh. “Do you really think those human-wolves care about us? We are not human. Not like them. To them, we are just animals to be disposed of. You will see. They will do it to you, too.”

Fear stabbed at my stomach at his words. I knew I shouldn’t listen to him, but he had voiced a deep fear inside me that I never let myself think about for long. Because the truth was, I never forgot that I was different from the rest of the Redwoods. They’d welcomed me into the pack; they’d taught me how to live in the human world and pass for one of them. But it had never escaped me that I *wasn’t* one of them. That I never would be, no matter how many lessons I learned about human social dynamics, or the right way to hold a fork, or anything else. I was a wolf first, and nothing would ever change that.

I’d often wondered why Greyson and the others were always so guarded when it came to talking about me in front of those outside the pack, like I was the Redwoods’ dirty little secret. But, looking at how Cesaries and the council had been so quick to condemn Helix, I was beginning to understand why.

*Maybe I* am *a dirty secret.*

But I tried to force some conviction into my voice. “Greyson would never let the council do this to me.”

Helix let out another harsh laugh.

I ignored it and continued. “I know you only attacked me in the woods because of the sire bond. It wasn’t your fault. You were only doing what you felt you had to do. But you can let go of that. The sire bond, it doesn’t affect me the way it does you, which must mean you can fight it.”

Helix just shook his head. “I cannot. I have tried. I didn’t *want* to attack you in the woods, Elle. I knew you were trying to help me, but my wolf needed to protect his Alpha, and so I hurt you anyway. The loyalty to my sire is more powerful than everything else. I’m sorry, Elle. I think I am exactly the monster they say I am.”

“No!” Hot, angry tears coursed down my cheeks. “No, I can help you! I can save you!”

I *needed* to save him, to prove once and for all that there was a way to stop this sire bond from making us do horrible things. Because maybe if I could prove that Helix could change, then I had a chance, too.

Helix hung his head. “I can’t live like this anymore. I can’t keep doing things I don’t want to do just because my wolf demands it. I think… I think maybe it was a mistake, asking to be turned.”

My heart ached at his words, and I dared to crouch down beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. When he didn’t attack me, I leaned in and wrapped my arms around him. “I’m so sorry.”

“Elle?”

I pulled back just far enough to look into his face. “What is it?”

“Will you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

His throat bobbed. “Kill me. Now. With honor.”

# **Episode 4022**

**Ava**

I scoured the woods for Xavier. What the hell had that been, with Knox? I’d known it wouldn’t be easy having my cousin back in the pack, but it seemed like things were already spiraling out of control between him and Xavier. I needed to talk to Xavier, Alpha to Luna. We needed to figure out how to handle this.

I followed Xavier’s scent through the forest, bypassing trees and stepping over rocks and bushes until I found him lying at the base of a tree.

I stopped short, frowning. “Xavier?”

He looked like he was asleep or, like, in some kind of trance. I gently touched his shoulder, and his eyes snapped open. He lurched upright with a gasp, his fingertips shifting into claws.

I didn’t back down. “Xavier, it’s me. It’s Ava.”

His blue eyes were wild as they searched my face, and for a split second, I was worried he didn’t recognize me. What the hell was going on with him? Then, a beat later, his eyes seemed to uncloud, and he focused on me.

“Ava?” he croaked.

My stomach twisted at the sound of his broken voice, and my heart picked up speed. Something was wrong with my mate.

“Xavier? What *was* that, just now?” It had seemed like he was going to attack me, even though I knew he wouldn’t have. Still, it was unnerving to see him like this. Xavier wasn’t the type to take naps in the forest, especially not when there was important pack business to take care of. Had something happened to him? “Were you dreaming or something?”

He ran a hand through his hair, and I caught a whiff of his scent. Just like that, my wolf went wild for him. She howled for me to be closer to him, to be with him. She would never have enough when it came to our mate. Our Alpha.

*Mine. Mine. Mine*, my wolf insisted.

I tried my best to ignore her. Now wasn’t the time for me to lose my head and throw myself at Xavier. We had much bigger things to worry about right now.

“Answer my question,” I pressed. I kept my tone gentle, but I wasn’t going to drop the issue. I needed to know what was going on.

Xavier looked genuinely troubled. I couldn’t decide if it was a good sign that he wasn’t trying to hide his emotions from me like he usually did, or if it meant that things were even worse than I’d feared.

“I… I don’t know,” he finally said. “I thought you were… someone else.”

*Someone else? Who?*

I considered asking, but then I realized I might not want to know the answer. Maybe it was best to just focus on the issue at hand and trust him to tell me when or if whatever was going on with him became relevant. Still, I didn’t like the idea of anyone else floating around in his head—awake or not.

I cleared my throat and tried to force some levity into my voice. “So, are you better now, or are you going to go back there and kill Knox?”

My words had the intended effect: Xavier’s grave expression disappeared and was replaced by a scowl. “The shrimp deserved that. Don’t think for a second that he didn’t.”

I put my hands up. “Hey, I’m not arguing. I’m just here to get a temperature check.”

He sighed. “No, I’m not going to kill him. I’ve told you that. At least, not as long as he doesn’t pull any more shit.”

*Well, that’s still… comforting.*

I slid down next to him. He seemed so out of sorts. His eyes were clouding over again as he seemed to get lost in thought.

I was desperate to know what he’d dreamed about, but I didn’t ask him again. He’d tell me if he thought it was important to share. For now, the best thing I could do was just be with him.

I leaned against him and rested my hand on his leg, a small, gentle reminder that he wasn’t alone.

He leaned forward and rubbed his face but didn’t brush my hand aside. Clearly, he was still wrestling with whatever the hell that dream had been about. It wasn’t like him to linger so much on something so… intangible. It must have been bad, to affect him like this.

My wolf was practically humming at his proximity, at the feel of his thigh muscles rippling under my hand with each of his movements. She remembered what had happened between the two of us earlier, the last time we’d been alone in the woods together. What we hadn’t been able to finish before Marissa had rushed over to tell us that the tents had been destroyed.

My voice was low and soft when I broke the silence that had settled between us. “We’re done packing. We’re waiting for your decision on what we do next.”

His hands dropped into his lap. “Decision?”

I nodded. “You’re our Alpha, remember? Whatever comes next, whatever we *do* next, it’s your call.”

He shot me an annoyed look. “I hadn’t forgotten.”

Personally, I wasn’t so sure. “Why don’t you just tell me what’s bothering you?”

He shook his head. “Greyson is pulling all this bullshit about that Rogue Helix. He couldn’t give me an answer about whether we were going to leave, or what. It’s a mess.”

Was that really what was bothering him? Feeling like he had to wait on Greyson before leaving the summit? I wasn’t sure.

*Xavier’s been under Greyson’s thumb for so long, he can’t seem to accept that his brother has no power over him.*

But I knew better than to remind him who was in charge of the Samara pack. It was a complicated subject, and—though Xavier would probably never admit it—there was likely a lot more going on underneath the surface of his frustration than feeling like Greyson was stepping on his toes. I wanted to be supportive of my mate, my Alpha. Not critical.

“Tell me what I can do to help you right now,” I said gently. “I’m your Luna.”

Saying the words out loud made me feel all tingly inside. Part of me had thought I’d never be here with Xavier, never truly be his Luna. And yet, here I was. My patience and devotion had paid off.

It was surreal to think about. This was everything I’d ever wanted, but I knew Xavier was still holding back. He still wasn’t telling me everything. And that was what I truly wanted. To have all of Xavier, heart and soul.

He shook his head. “You don’t need to help me with anything, Ava.”

I pulled my hand back, stung by his words. Was this how it was going to be between the two of us? Him holding back his feelings for me? Keeping me at arm’s length? I knew he *did* have feelings for me. I’d felt them—I’d seen them in his eyes. All he had to do was accept the way he felt, to give in to what was right in front of him.

“Then what *is* my job as your Luna?” I pressed.

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

I shook my head and moved to stand, but he caught my hand.

“No, talk to me,” he said. “What do you mean?”

“Now that we’re Alpha and Luna… Are things different between us?” I asked hesitantly.

I didn’t dare to ask the real question—whether we were officially back together again, like boyfriend and girlfriend. Like the mates we’d always been. It felt like a subject I just couldn’t broach yet, though I hoped we were heading that way.

Soon, I hoped, everything would be how it once was, but even better. I thought of the Luna mark on my shoulder.

*Things are already better. I’d take that pain a thousand times over if it meant being with Xavier forever.*

“I thought this was what you wanted,” he said.

Heat rushed into my face. “Yes, it is. But what about us, Xavier?”

“Stop,” he said. “You don’t need to worry about the two of us.”

“But I do,” I insisted. “I want to be a good Luna to you, to the pack.”

“And you will be. I never would’ve done this with you if I had any doubts.” He finally met my eyes. “Are we clear?”

My breath caught. “Yes.”

My wolf begged me to close the distance between us, to finish what we’d started in the woods earlier.

“Xavier, I want to protect the pack, but as Luna I have to do what my Alpha wants.” I licked my lips as I considered what to say next, and his gaze dropped to my mouth. Suddenly, my words dried up. I had to look away to keep my focus, to remember what I’d been about to say. “But how am I supposed to do that when my Alpha won’t *tell me* what he wants?”

# **Episode 4023**

**Xavier**

I could sense Ava’s arousal so strongly it might as well have been my own. She had to know exactly what she was doing to me, how her closeness was making my wolf crazy. He was crying out to be with his Luna, practically clawing and biting at the inside of my mind to get out and claim her.

We’d come so close, earlier this evening… And god, it had felt so right. My body and soul had felt alive in a way I’d never experienced before. Until now, I’d never understood how potent the connection between an Alpha and his Luna could be. It was like the attraction of our mate bond on steroids—powerful and intoxicating, to the point that it was almost too much.

*Almost*.

And yet, I found myself wanting to hold back. Just a little bit. I knew what Ava wanted from me. She wanted everything I had to give and more. She wanted to be my only mate, the only woman I cared about. She wanted not only to lead the Samaras by my side, not only for me to acknowledge our mate bond, not only to share my bed—she wanted intimacy. Trust. Love.

But I’d already given her about as much commitment as I was capable of giving. What I’d given her felt like a huge leap to me, like I was giving her my all, more than I’d ever thought I could. And yet it never seemed to be enough for her. And the more I tried, the more I allowed myself to open up to her, to give her what she wanted, what she deserved, the more I felt myself falling into something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. It was as exhilarating as it was dangerous, because this was Ava we were talking about.

Even after everything we’d been through since she’d come back from the spirit world, there was still so much hanging between us, polarizing our undeniable attraction to each other—our ugly history, Cali, Adéluce and the web of lies I’d woven to appease her. Then there was the fact that, if I was being honest with myself, I still wasn’t sure if I could trust Ava one hundred percent. But above all, the fact remained that when all was said and done, she just wasn’t the woman I wanted to be with. And that was possibly the worst part of all this. That, to Ava, we were standing on the precipice of everything she’d ever wanted. But to me, as much as I genuinely did care about her, Ava was my backup option. Plan B.

It wasn’t fair to her, and if she decided she hated my guts and wanted revenge against me when the truth of everything finally came out, I didn’t think I’d be able to blame her.

But, right now, she was all I had. Even if this was destined to end in heartbreak and destruction. And god help me, I did want her—and I was too much of a selfish asshole to do the right thing and keep my distance.

“Do you really want to know what I want?” I asked, my voice dropping low.

She licked her lips again and nodded. “Yes?”

My wolf was rabid with need. *I* was rabid with need. I couldn’t tell where his desire ended and mine began, and I turned to Ava and hauled her into my lap. I wanted her. Needed her. And, more than that, I was desperate to drown out the horrible dream I’d just had of Cali.

Adéluce had to have planted it in my head, but I pushed all thoughts of the vampire-bitch out of my mind as my lips descended onto Ava’s.

The moment our mouths touched, sparks shot across my body, and I groaned. Every nerve ending was on fire with need—a need only Ava could satisfy. I threw myself into the kiss, drinking in the taste of her mouth, savoring the sighs and moans that slipped out of her throat as she clung to me.

The kiss, already needy and full of heat, turned molten. My hands slid down her body, feeling out each dip and curve. My wolf wouldn’t be satisfied until he had all of her, until he’d claimed her the way he so desperately needed to. My fingertips brushed over her breast, and she let out a moan that went straight to my cock.

“Xavier, please,” she gasped out. “I need you.”

Her words sent a pulse of guilt through my stomach. This was everything she’d been wanting for so long, everything my wolf had been wanting—but it wasn’t everything I wanted. Not even close.

For a split second, I considered pushing her away. She deserved better than this. Was I attracted to her? Yes. Did I care about her? Did I feel a deep connection to her? Absolutely. But none of that changed the fact that I wasn’t in this like she was. Not with my whole heart and soul. We might’ve been mates, and my wolf might’ve seen her as his match. But the human half of me was still in love with someone else.

And that made me a real bastard for allowing this to continue.

But I couldn’t stop myself. Or maybe I just didn’t *want* to stop myself. Maybe I needed to feel good for a minute, to stop thinking about everything that was wrong with my life and just revel in this moment with this beautiful woman, who I cared about deeply. This woman whose touch made me feel like I was burning up in the best way possible.

She shifted so she was straddling my lap, and as her tongue slid over mine, her hips rolled against my rapidly hardening cock.

I was lost. The Wolf Moon beamed down on us, urging us to finish what we’d started at the Luna ceremony. To consummate our bond once and for all.

Clothes were torn away in an instant, and I eased Ava onto her back before diving between her legs and lapping at her core. Her scent engulfed me, driving my wolf mad, and I savored the taste of her on my tongue, the cries and pleas that fell on my ears.

She tugged at my hair and rutted her hips against my mouth, seeking her own release. It was the sexiest version of Ava I’d seen as she came undone. I worked one finger inside her and then another, and her cries echoed through the night.

I made her come once, twice, three times before I released her. For a moment, I stared at her, panting, my mouth still slick with her essence. Then, with a feral look in her eyes, she pushed me back against the tree, climbed onto my lap, and sank down onto my cock.

She was so hot, so slick, that I almost lost myself immediately. It took every ounce of self-control I possessed to hold back, to make this last. I’d never felt so desperate, so needy and on edge. With a roll of her hips, she took my breath away, riding me like she had every right to, like she was claiming me.

Her lips crashed into mine, a messy kiss full of tongue and desire. I clung to her, pulling her down on my cock harder, faster.

“Xavier.” She whined out my name in broken syllables. “I’m close.”

“Fuck,” I groaned. I wasn’t far behind.

I mouthed a hot trail down her throat, over the tops of her breasts, and to her shoulder. The Luna mark shone up at me from her skin. I pressed a hand to it as I worked my cock into her faster, harder. My other hand slipped down to the point where our hips met, and my fingers brushed her clit.

Ava exploded around me, her back bowing, her moans loud enough that I was sure everyone in the state could hear her. Her inner muscles rippled around my cock, and white-hot pleasure blurred the world around me. For a moment, nothing existed but Ava and me. Nothing and nobody else.

In the aftermath, Ava curled against my chest with a sated sigh, and I kissed her forehead. My wolf was satisfied—for now.

“I didn’t think this was how I’d be spending my first night as Luna,” Ava confessed, breaking the silence.

“What do you mean?” How else would she have expected the night to go?

She lifted her face to meet my eyes. “You see me. You see me as your partner.”

I processed this for a moment before nodding. “Yes.”

She wasn’t wrong. Ava was the only person I could do this path with right now. Being Samara Alpha.

She cupped my cheek and kissed me. Gently, this time. “I love you, X.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. A new, thicker silence dragged on between us, long after the moment passed.

Ava stiffened, then climbed off my lap with a sigh. I caught her hand, but she refused to look at me.

I struggled to come up with some kind of explanation. “I didn’t mean… I’m still just getting used to all this.”

“Well, let me know when you’ve ‘gotten used’ to having me as your Luna.”

“Ava…”

She turned to me, staring down at me with hurt in her eyes. My stomach twisted, and she must have seen the regret in my face, because her expression softened. “Tell me what you want to do with the pack right now.”

“Greyson and the rest of the alliance told us to wait.”

She rolled her eyes. “Greyson isn’t the Alpha of the Samaras. You are. So, what do you want to do? Stay and wait for Big Mac to possibly blip us home, or leave now?”

I stood and met her eyes, a new confidence coursing through me. “If they want us to leave, fine,” I said. “We’re leaving now.”

# **Episode 4024**

I stood outside the council’s cell, resisting the urge to pace. The guards would be coming back soon after they ate, and what was I going to do if Elle wasn’t out of there? Anxiety spiraled through my stomach as I checked the time. What was taking so long? Should I try to hurry Elle up? I turned toward the cell, ready to call out to her, but I stopped myself short.

The second the guards were back, Elle and I would be in a world of trouble, and Helix would probably end up impossibly worse off. I knew Greyson was trying to convince Cesaries to show Helix some mercy, and if Elle and I ended up getting caught breaking into his cell while they were speaking… Well, it wouldn’t look good. For any of us. Helix would probably be forced to kiss any hope of mercy goodbye.

Branches crunched nearby, and I heard footsteps. Shit. Was it the guards? I ducked behind the wall of the shed to hide, feeling like an idiot. Hopefully no one would look down and see my shoes sticking out like the Wicked Witch of the East. I peeked my head out briefly, catching a glimpse of them. It was the same ones as before.

Crap crap crap. These guards were werewolves. If they were really on the lookout, they’d probably just pick up my scent, even if they hadn’t just heard my movement. With ears and noses like theirs, they probably wouldn’t even have to be all that diligent to catch Elle and me in the act.

*Please, please,* please *assume I’m just passing through and not trying to sneak in to see a prisoner. Nothing to see here. Just keep going about your business eating mashed potatoes…*

The Wolf Moon must have been smiling down on me, because the guards were either truly apathetic about their jobs, or they really didn’t pick up on the fact that I was hiding behind the wall as they passed by. They didn’t so much as pause and after a few moments, the sounds of their footsteps faded into the night, and I was alone again outside the holding cell.

I let out a breath. *Thank god. Maybe we can get through this without making things worse, after all.*

I heard a scuffle inside the holding cell and whipped around, staring up at the window Elle had climbed through. Was Helix attacking her?

*I should have known better than to just let her go in there alone! If she gets hurt, I’ll never forgive myself. Greyson probably wouldn’t forgive me, either.*

I assessed the amount of space between the ground and the window. I wasn’t nearly as athletic as Elle—I doubted I’d be able to get inside the same way.

Maybe I could blast through the wall? But that would definitely make some noise. A *lot* of noise. Those guards would probably come running, and then we’d get caught for sure.

But if the alternative was leaving Elle at Helix’s mercy, letting him kill her? Was there really a choice?

I pulled in a breath, ready to call out for Elle when I heard a sharp whimper followed by a thud.

*Shit!* I needed to get in there! Maybe I could at least *try* to scale the wall?

I jogged backward to get a run-up, ready to sprint toward the wall, but then Elle’s hand appeared on the window ledge and she hoisted herself through the small space. She tumbled to the ground and landed on her back with a grunt and a wheeze.

“*Elle!*” I whisper-yelled as I rushed over to her. “Are you all right? I heard noises—”

I gasped when I saw a red stain marring Elle’s skin.

“Oh my god!” I burst out. “What the hell happened in there? Did he hurt you?”

Elle hauled herself to her feet with a groan and shook her head. “It’s not my blood.”

I frowned. “If it’s not your blood, then it’s…”

She just stared at me blankly, leaving my mind to fill in the gaps. Something like horror pricked at my mind as I stared at her bloodied skin. “Elle? What happened?”

She shook her head with a whimper, and her body started to tremble. I reached for her on instinct, and she collapsed into my arms. Her body hitched with her sobs, shaking, letting out a grief too great for her body to contain.

*What the…?*

Almost as soon as the possibility occurred to me, I shied away from it. *No, that couldn’t be it. That’s… way too dark. That can’t be what happened… Can it?*

I looked down at the blood on Elle. The blood that wasn’t hers. She hadn’t gone into the holding cell with blood on her skin, which meant it could only belong to one person.

It was Helix’s blood. I was sure of it. But… Did that really mean what I thought it meant?

I ran a hand over Elle’s hair and rubbed her back, trying to console her but all too aware that we couldn’t linger here for long. At some point, those guards would come back, or maybe even a council member. We had to be long gone by then.

“Elle,” I whispered. “What happened? Talk to me. Please.”

But even as I asked the question, I worried that I already knew the truth. God, I hoped I was wrong.

She pulled in a shaky breath. “I did what Helix wanted. I… I killed him.”

I froze. Despite all my suspicions, hearing my worst fears confirmed sent shock and horror racing through me. Never in a million years would I have guessed that this could happen. If I’d felt there was even the slightest possibility of foul play, I never would’ve agreed to go to the holding cell with Elle.

*Oh god. What are we going to do?*

I pulled back so I could see Elle’s tearstained face. “Elle, Greyson is talking to the council. Right now. Things could’ve been different. Why… What were you thinking?”

She winced, then shook her head. “No, I don’t think they would be different. And Helix didn’t want to be executed like some kind of criminal. He begged me to do it. He… He wanted to die with honor. I didn’t want to hurt him. I never wanted to…”

She dissolved into another round of sobs, and I tightened my arms around her. I was the only thing holding her upright.

I stroked her hair. “I know, I know.”

I still didn’t know exactly what had happened in that holding cell, but maybe I didn’t need to. Not right now, anyway.

I heard footsteps in the distance and released Elle. “Come on, we have to get out of here. Let’s get back to the camp.”

As we quietly hurried back, I prepared a few excuses for why we were out and about, just in case anyone stopped to question us. A reason for Elle being covered in blood was trickier to come up with… A nose bleed? That had to be believable, right?

But, fortunately, nobody stopped us, and I thanked our lucky stars when we made it back to camp without being forced to explain ourselves. I wasn’t the best liar in the world, and right now Elle seemed like such a wild card. I had no idea what to expect from her if someone came at us asking real questions.

Elle was silent the whole walk back. She’d stopped crying, but I could practically sense the guilt and grief radiating off her. This was such a mess.

*What if the council finds out that Elle did this? And what about the Northwind pack? Ethaniel all but jumped at the opportunity to kill Helix himself.*

Sure, the end result was the same—they’d been planning to execute Helix, anyway—but if they found out Elle had done this, that she’d given Helix a death he’d chosen, would there be backlash? Or, worse, would the council start asking hard questions about why Elle cared so much about Helix? Would Elle and Greyson’s sire bond be revealed?

Anxiety churned in my stomach, and I felt like I was going to be sick. And yet I still knew that was probably only a fraction of the pain that Elle was feeling.

She looked so defeated. So unlike the fierce, effervescent wolf I’d come to know. I wished more than anything that this heavy burden hadn’t fallen on Elle’s shoulders—but she’d probably felt she owed her friend this last gift. After all, they’d been two of a kind. And now that Helix was gone, Elle was all alone—the last turned wolf.

*Poor Elle.* I slipped an arm around her as we reached the camp, keeping an eye out for Greyson. I didn’t know how I would even begin to tell him what had happened.

“Cali!” Greyson approached us, then frowned when he saw the blood on Elle. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Elle said flatly.

I grimaced. He had to know the truth. “It’s… Helix.”

“What are you talking about?” Greyson demanded, his eyes widening. “Cesaries promised to stop the execution.”

The breath stuttered out of my lungs. “They weren’t going to execute Helix?”

Greyson shook his head. “I got Cesaries to change his mind.”

That meant…

Elle crumpled to the ground, her agonized scream echoing through the night.

# **Episode 4025**

Elle’s wail of anguish echoed through my head.

*I can’t believe this is happening. If we’d just waited for Greyson to come back, if he’d had a chance to tell us about Cesaries changing his mind…*

Then Helix would still be alive. He’d still have a future.

But it was too late. He was dead. And Elle had killed him—all because he’d believed he was going to be executed anyway. Because they’d both believed his death was a foregone conclusion, and if he was destined to die, he wanted Elle to be the one to kill him. Elle, who was lying on the grass, openly sobbing, her arms wrapped around herself like she was on the verge of shattering into pieces.

My stomach lurched again, so powerfully that I was half convinced I was going to throw up all over Greyson’s feet.

“Oh my god,” I whimpered. “Oh my god. No… No, no, no, no, no…”

This was a nightmare. I pinched myself, hard, but I didn’t wake up. There was no escaping this. This was real life. Cruel, horrific, and irreversible.

“Cali?” Greyson grabbed my arms, and I leaned on him instinctively. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s too late,” I whispered.

“What do you mean it’s too late? Where were you just now?” He looked down at Elle, his face pained. “What’s wrong with her? Why is she covered in blood?”

I didn’t even know where to begin. How to string together the damning words to describe what had happened. What Elle had done. What I’d enabled her to do.

“We… We went to see Helix,” I said. “I didn’t know what the plan was—or if it even *was* the plan. You have to believe me. I had no idea. Elle wanted to talk to him. To say goodbye”—my voice broke on the word—“in case… in case the council couldn’t be convinced to spare him.”

She *had* said goodbye, hadn’t she? Just not in the way I’d thought she would.

I looked at Elle, who was still lying silent on the ground, tears slipping down her cheeks.

Greyson released me, his eyes darkening with clear understanding. He crouched down next to Elle. “Elle… Talk to me. What happened?”

She didn’t respond at first. She just stared off into the distance, silently crying.

“Elle.” Greyson took her hand and eased her up into a sitting position. “Tell me what happened with Helix.”

She drew in a shaky breath. “I killed him. He asked me to do it.”

Greyson released her hand and squeezed his eyes shut. “*Fuck*.”

“She wanted to see him,” I added quickly. “I knew you were probably going to convince them, but they were so adamant about making an example of him…”

“Then why did you even ask me to talk to them?” he asked. He turned back to Elle. “Why did you do it? You knew I was trying to fix this! I told you to stay here, to keep a low profile and stay away from Helix, and let me handle it. Why did you completely disregard my orders?”

Something in his tone broke through her grief, because her lip curled up in a snarl that looked horrifically wolf-like on her human face. “Maybe none of this even matters! Even though they were going to let him live, they *never* would have let him be himself again. Even if the Northwind pack had agreed not to execute him, Helix still would’ve been as good as dead—either imprisoned or wolfless or both. Always afraid, always hunted and vulnerable. What kind of life is that? He didn’t become a werewolf to live that way. It wasn’t what he wanted. So, I freed him. He asked me to do it, so I did.”

It was heartbreaking to hear. I could see even as Elle spoke, she was trying to convince herself of what she was saying. She hadn’t wanted Helix dead. That was just the truth of the matter, but now it was too late to take anything back. If I’d realized sooner what she was going to do… There were so many things that could be different.

Greyson’s face had gone white—with shock or horror or rage or all three, I wasn’t sure. I’d never seen Elle speak to him like that. Emotions were running high, and we needed to put a pin in this before things got out of control. Hell, we needed to get out of here before this situation got any worse.

“Elle,” I said gently. “Go get your things. We have to get ready to leave.”

She clambered to her feet and stormed away without another word.

Greyson stayed in place, looking like he was about to explode. I could only imagine how upset he had to be. We’d begged him to intercede on Helix’s behalf, and he had. He’d accomplished the truly amazing feat of convincing the council to change their minds. And for what? So Elle and I could run off and Elle could kill Helix anyway?

I bowed my head in shame. This was *partially* my fault, at the very least. I didn’t know what to do or say to make it better.

*Nothing will make this better*, I realized. *Helix is dead. Elle killed him because she thought she didn’t have a choice. It was her decision. And his.*

“Greyson, I’m so sorry,” I said. “I should’ve handled the situation better. I should’ve—”

He cut me off by closing the distance between us and wrapping his arms around me.

“Stop,” he said. “It’s over.”

“But I’m the acting Luna. I need to take responsibility for my actions.” My voice broke, and a sob slipped out of my throat. “I… I’m just so sorry.”

Greyson hugged me close, stroking my hair as I cried, just like I’d done for Elle not so long ago.

“I didn’t know what Elle was going to do,” I said brokenly. “You have to believe me. This… It isn’t anyone’s fault. It’s just a horrible tragedy. Elle was just trying to help her friend the only way she knew how. She never meant…”

I was babbling now. Trying to make sense of this senseless violence, of this turn of events that had broken my heart in two.

I allowed myself to fall apart in Greyson’s arms, held together only by his love and strength. And when the worst of my heartache had passed, when I could breathe without sobbing, when I thought I could form words again without falling to pieces, I pulled back and looked up at my mate.

“Greyson,” I whispered. “What do we do?”

He shook his head and blew out a breath. “I have no fucking idea. The council’s going to figure out that Elle was the one who killed him. How the hell are we supposed to explain that?”

I nodded. I’d been wondering the exact same thing since Elle had confessed to what she’d done. Her scent had to be all over the cell. It wouldn’t take a huge amount of effort for the council to figure out what she’d done. I believed Elle’s claim she hadn’t gone into his cell with the intention of killing him, but it was clear that she hadn’t given a single thought to what would happen afterward.

“It’s not like we can even claim that he attacked her and she defended herself,” Greyson continued. “He was captured. He was chained in silver. She wasn’t meant to be anywhere near him. And she went and killed him on purpose, before Ethaniel was given the chance.”

I swallowed painfully at the mental image. “At least she gave him an honorable death.”

“He never should have died!” Greyson exclaimed. “I’d saved him. I’d taken care of it. I’d gotten through to Cesaries, and for *what*?”

I didn’t know. I felt… Well, *horrible* didn’t even begin to cover how I felt. Regret filled my heart with every breath, and I wished more than anything that everything could have gone differently.

“What about leaving?” I asked.

“Well, we’d better get to the meet-up point right now, before Cesaries comes looking for Elle,” Greyson said grimly. “Or me.”

“You?” My eyes widened. “Are you worried Cesaries will think you planned this, somehow?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Let’s just focus on getting out of here right now.”

He took my hand, and we went to join the rest of the pack. I had no clue how we could possibly explain all of this to them.

“We have to get going, right now,” Greyson said. “Something’s happened.”

“What is it?” Jay asked.

“I’ll explain on the way to the meet-up point,” Greyson said.

Rishika and Artemis exchanged a glance.

“Are we in danger, Greyson?” Rishika asked bluntly.

He shook his head. “Not right at this moment, but it’s time to leave.”

We all started to head toward the meet-up point. We’d only made it a few steps when I realized Elle hadn’t moved a muscle.

“Elle?” I called.

Greyson turned back to look at her, his brow furrowing. “Elle? Let’s go.”

She shook her head.

Greyson wrapped her in a hug. “I can’t imagine what you must be feeling right now. But if you did what you did because Helix asked you to, then you did the kindest thing you could as a friend.”

Elle’s shoulders heaved as she cried into Greyson’s chest, and my heart broke as I watched the two of them. I wished there was something more I could do for Elle, but this grief, this loss—it wasn’t something that could be resolved in one night. It would probably take Elle a long, *long* time to get through this.

Rishika doubled back. “We have to go. Everyone’s getting restless.”

Big Mac stomped over. “Exactly, so get a move on! I’ve got a lot of blipping to do, so let’s not waste any more time.”

Greyson released Elle. “Come on, Elle. We need to get out of here before the council starts asking questions.”

“I’ll walk with you,” I offered. It was the very least I could do for her.

But Elle stepped back and shook her head again. “No, I’m not coming with you. I’m leaving. On my own.”

# **Episode 4026**

**Greyson**

I frowned at Elle. “What are you talking about? You have to come with us. We’re going back to the pack house.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m not going with you. Please, Greyson. I need some distance.”

Cali stepped forward, frowning. “I understand that you’re grieving right now, but you need to be with your pack, where you’ll be safe. Especially after the council’s new law.” She held out a hand to Elle. “Just come back with us, and we’ll figure out the rest later, okay? We’re with you. We’re here for you. Whatever you need.”

Elle stared at Cali’s offered hand but didn’t take it. “I just… I never realized that my choice to become a werewolf would have so many consequences. I need to think about this.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. She wanted to leave? I knew that Helix’s death had to be weighing on her, but she clearly wasn’t thinking straight. She didn’t know what it would mean for her to be alone out there without the protection of her pack. She’d essentially be a Rogue if she went off on her own, only doubly vulnerable because she lacked the ability to pass for human. If she needed time to come to terms with the decision she’d made, fine. But she didn’t have to do it alone. She’d be safer with the pack, with me. I’d make sure the council never found out the truth about her. I’d go to war with the council before I’d let them lock her up in a silver collar.

“Elle, don’t leave,” I said. “I’ll protect you. I swear. You don’t need to worry. We’ve got your back. Let us—let *me*—help you.”

She gave me a sad smile. “I know you’d protect me. But that’s part of why I need to leave. It will be safer for all of you if I’m not around. Don’t you see? That way, no one will have a reason to question how we met, right?”

I shook my head. She couldn’t do this. Sure, the summit had been one clusterfuck after another, and I wanted to keep my pack safe from the fallout, but not like this. I’d never choose to lose any of my pack members, not even to provide the others with a stronger sense of safety.

Elle was my responsibility. I’d promised her father that I’d take care of her. And beyond responsibility, I cared about her. She was my friend, a member of my pack. What the hell would it say about me if I let her walk away when things got hard?

“Greyson, I need time on my own to figure out what I want from this new life I’ve chosen,” Elle said. “I’ll be safe, I promise.”

“You can’t promise that—” I began, but Cali took my hand and cut me off.

*Greyson, she needs this*, Cali’s voice came in my head.

I sighed. She was right. They both were.

I cleared my throat. “If that’s what you need, Elle, we support you. And you know you’re always welcome back at the pack house?”

Elle nodded. “I do.”

“But I still don’t like this,” I growled. “There are too many ways for you to get hurt if you go off alone. What if the Bitterfangs go after you when you’re off by yourself? At least stay at the pack house long enough for me to make arrangements for you to be safe when you travel.”

She shook her head again. “No, that will take too long. Greyson, I need space. I want to be *away* from werewolves right now, not depend on them for help. I might try to see my father again.”

My eyes widened. “Wait, but I thought your father wouldn’t accept you back? Do you… Do you want to be a wolf again?”

“Not permanently,” she said. “I just need to remember where I came from. And even if my father doesn’t let me back, Helix’s family deserves to know what happened to him. I’m the only one who can give them that.”

That was… a very good point.

I sighed. “I can’t argue with that. I’ll let you go, if that’s what you really want. What you really need. But Elle, I want you to rejoin the pack when you’re ready. There will always be a place for you with us.”

She nodded, blinking fast. “Thank you. That means a lot. Will you… Will you tell Lucian where I went? And that I’ll…” She seemed to consider her words carefully. “That I’ll miss him?”

Passing a message along to the princeling, even on Elle’s behalf, was pretty much the last thing I’d ever want to do, but what I wanted didn’t matter. Elle was the one who mattered right now, and she needed this. So I nodded. “I will.”

Elle nodded and turned away, then headed toward the woods, passing Xavier and Ava, who were just entering the Redwood campsite.

Xavier eyed Elle as she passed him and disappeared into the trees. He focused on me as he approached. “The Samaras are leaving now.”

I frowned. “I thought we decided to wait—”

He cut me off. “We don’t need a witch to blip us back. All we need is a head start.”

I didn’t understand where this sudden urgency was coming from. What was wrong with the plan we’d already worked out? “We’re just going to the meet-up point now. Why travel all the way home on foot if you don’t have to? It’s a waste of energy—and you have no idea what might happen on the way. Just blip with us.”

Xavier clenched and unclenched his jaw. “I’ll think about it.”

He started walking back the way he’d come, and Ava lingered for a moment to shrug. She gave me a little half-smirk that pissed me off no end. “We’ll let you know.”

Then she followed after Xavier.

*Why the hell is Xavier being such an idiot about this?* *We had a plan. Albeit one that got a bit sidetracked, but now we’re back on it. And it was a safe one to get everyone back home quickly and in one piece. Why is he being so difficult? What is there to “think about”?*

Cali sidled up to me. “We should let the other packs know about the plan.”

I nodded. “Good idea.”

“I’ll go with Lola to tell Mace and the Blue Bloods.”

I grimaced. “And I’ll tell Lucian. Seems I have a message to pass along, anyway.”

Cali raised her eyebrows, probably thinking the same thing as me—that the princeling was going to be monumentally displeased when he learned that Elle was gone. “Good luck.”

I headed to the Vanguard camp, where I found Lucian regaling Aysel and the other members of the Vanguard delegation with the harrowing tale of his fight against Dayton, Geena, and Helix.

I stopped for a moment to listen, and my lips curved into a smile. Strangely enough, he didn’t mention getting knocked out.In his version of events, he’d also taken on both Dayton and Geena single-handedly.

*Must be nice to not have to live in the real world.*

I cleared my throat. “I hate to interrupt story time, but it’s time to go.”

Lucian turned to face me with a smirk. “Ah, yes. I heard that you wanted us all to pack up and leave. Afraid of Malakai’s wrath?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. *How could Elle possibly miss* anything *about this asshat?*

“Malakai and his cronies slashed up the Redwood tents—the Samaras’ and the Blue Bloods’ too,” I said. “With a warning like that, it doesn’t seem like a good idea to wait here for the summit to end—if Malakai wants to start a war, it’s best if we head back to familiar territory and rally our full packs.”

The princeling jumped to his feet, his eyes wide. “He slashed *your* tents?”

*Wow. I didn’t know he cared.*

“It’s fine,” I began. “Nobody was hurt—”

“But what about *our* tents?” Lucian gestured at the perfectly intact line of Vanguard tents. “What? Are our tents not good enough for Malakai’s attacks, did they need to be the summit’s instead? I just don’t do well with cheap fabric. This is imported tarpaulin fabric! Only the best material for Vanguard tents!” He grabbed the flap of his own tent. “Who wouldn’t want to desecrate such high-quality accommodations?”

*Good god. Is he actually feeling left out because his shit wasn’t vandalized?*

I sighed. “I’m sorry your tents weren’t slashed up by a psychopath. Maybe he just got tired?”

“No,” Lucian said darkly. “This is an insult to my honor! Malakai doesn’t see me as a worthy foe—and I will prove him wrong, make no mistake!”

I was about to tell him to cool his jets when Aysel lazily rose to her feet. “Brother, I’m tired. Can’t we just leave? I’m tired of this camping trip, anyway.”

Lucian paused, looking between me and Aysel. Then, after a beat, he smoothed his hair and nodded. “Well, if it’s what the Vanguard princess wants, then we will go.”

“Good,” I said shortly. “But before you leave, I have a message for you from Elle.”

His chest puffed up, and a grin pulled at his lips. “Oh? Does she wish to travel with her mate instead of the Redwoods?”

“She left,” I said bluntly.

Lucian was aghast. “By *herself*? How could you let her do that? When I get back, I’ll have her placed under my protection.”

“I hate to burst your bubble, but you’re not going to find Elle when you get back,” I said. “She decided to go back to her old pack for a while. She wants you to know she’ll…” I almost gagged on the words. “She’ll miss you.”

Lucian’s voice dropped low. Dangerously low. “I beg your pardon?”

The princeling was about to go nuclear.

# **Episode 4027**

While Greyson dealt with the unenviable task of informing Lucian that we were leaving soon, and that Elle was gone, Lola and I headed over to the Blue Blood camp to see if there were ready to head to the meet-up point.

The Bitterfangs were getting too bold. The sooner we and our allies left the summit and got back to our home turf, the better.

Mace was the first Blue Blood we came across, almost like he’d appointed himself the sentry for his pack.

*Actually, that’s probably exactly what he did*, I realized. An Alpha’s job was to protect their pack, and Mace clearly took his role very seriously.

He stood when he saw us approaching. “What’s the word?” he asked.

“We’re all heading to the meet-up point now,” I said. “We wanted to see if you were ready.”

He nodded. “We’re ready. Did Greyson figure out everything with Helix?”

I winced at the mention of the now-dead wolf. It was just so sad, and so much of that pain had seemed preventable. Elle had clearly thought otherwise, even after learning that Cesaries had decided to spare Helix. I didn’t blame her for that belief, but I still wished something could have been done to prevent all this heartache. I hadn’t killed him, but it still felt like I was going to drown in guilt and regret every time I thought of the young wolf.

“Cali?” Lola nudged my shoulder, pulling me back to the present.

“Oh, sorry. Um, yeah. Everything’s sorted out,” I lied.

Mace nodded. “Good. I’ll get my pack moving now.”

I held out a hand to him, which he shook. “Be safe,” I said. “We’ll see you there.”

Lola and I started back toward the Redwood camp. We made it about halfway there when I caught Lola’s arm.

“Hold on,” I said. “I want to stop by the Cobalt camp and say goodbye.”

Lola frowned. “But shouldn’t we hurry up? They have their own witch; they don’t need to gather up the way we do. Time isn’t on the rest of our sides right now.”

“But we should check in on them, shouldn’t we? Porter had said he’d stand with us,” I reminded her. “We have to show that we support them and we care what happens to them, right?”

I felt strongly about it. Maybe it was the fake Luna mark bolstering me. If they were going to stand with us, the least we could do was make sure they weren’t having any issues leaving.

Lola nodded. “Fair enough. Lead the way.”

We headed toward the Cobalt camp, which was adjacent to the Bitterfang camp.

*Ugh. Fantastic.*

My body was tense as a tightrope as we made our way past the Bitterfang tents. Thankfully, no one was out this late, and we made it to Rowena’s tent without incident. I stopped outside the tent, my hand halfway to the tent flap, when I realized Rowena was probably asleep.

*What should I do?*

“Lola, do you have any paper on you?” I whispered. “I want to leave a note.”

Lola turned out her pockets, which were empty. “Sorry. I didn’t know we’d be leaving secret messages.”

“Dammit,” I muttered. I’d have to find another way to leave Rowena a message.

We turned to go, but then a sleepy voice called out, “Cali?”

I turned to see Rowena blinking at me from the entrance to her tent.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” I whispered. “We didn’t mean to wake you.”

She shook her head. “It’s fine. What’s going on?”

I smiled. “I just wanted to come and tell you we’re leaving.”

Rowena’s brow furrowed. “Already? Our pack was going to leave in the morning after the summit ended.”

“I know, but we figured it would be best to make a quiet exit from the summit before things got any uglier. I suggest you all do the same, especially since you’re next to the Bitterfangs…”

Her expression turned grave. “So you do think this means war is on the horizon with them?”

I sighed. “It definitely looks that way, and that’s how we’re interpreting it, just to be safe.”

“Of course,” Rowena said. “You have to protect your pack here and at home.”

“Thank you for understanding,” I said. “And please, keep yourselves safe.”

Rowena looked back toward her tent, then took my hand. “I know we’re not the Alphas of our packs, but our voices count, too. I want to be clear that we will fight alongside Greyson.”

I smiled. “Thank you. You don’t know what it means to me to know we have allies in this fight. We really appreciate it.”

“We’re glad to help. But we must proceed carefully, Cali. I’ve heard a lot of talk about the Bitterfangs. Not only are they deadly, but they have one of the biggest packs I’ve ever heard of.”

My stomach twisted. *Well, that doesn’t sound great.*

I forced a smile. “Thanks for the warning.”

“If you need to get in touch with our pack, text me or Big Mac can get a message to me, witch to witch,” Rowena said. “Don’t hesitate to reach out, okay? We’ll get the rest of the Cobalts and come to the Redwoods’ aid.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

As Lola and I left the Cobalt camp, I was feeling just the tiniest bit better. Sure, the odds were definitely *not* in our favor, but at least now we had solid allies and new friends. That had to count for something, right?

*It’s the friends we made along the way during the war…*

I only hoped it would be enough. With the Redwoods, the Blue Bloods, the Samaras, the Vanguards, and now the Cobalts standing together, hopefully we’d stand a chance against the Bitterfangs. Or, better yet, our alliance would be strong enough to keep the Bitterfangs from attacking altogether. Maybe they’d see how our ranks had grown and would decide it wasn’t worth it to start an all-out pack war. Plus, we had two other potential packs on our side: the Ironwoods and Aspens.

Admittedly, considering what I knew of the Bitterfangs, it didn’t seem likely that they’d back down from a fight they so clearly wanted. They didn’t seem to see violence as something to be avoided. If anything, it seemed like they were thrilled by the idea of a war. Honora and Malakai in particular didn’t seem to care about the prospect of losing a bunch of their people.

But, hey, a girl could hope, right? It wasn’t too late for them to change their minds. It wasn’t too late for all of us to put this ugliness behind us. I, for one, would hold onto that hope right up until the pack war began.

As we hurried past the Bitterfang tents, a wolf stepped out in front of us.

Lola immediately tensed and shoved me behind her. I frowned, confused by her protective behavior until a low voice growled, “Ah, the half-breed. You’re still hanging around? So brave of you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Lola snapped.

The wolf leaned in closer, and Lola’s body began to shake—not with fear, I realized, but with rage. After what had happened during the Wolf Moon rise, I didn’t totally trust Lola not to fly off the handle.

I stepped out in front of her. “As the Luna of the Redwood pack, I need to ask you to back away from my pack member.”

The wolf laughed. “I don’t listen to Fae, Luna or not.”

I stood my ground. “I don’t give a fuck. I don’t get scared from bigot Alphas who send their little cronies to do their dirty work.”

The wolf took a step closer, his eyes narrowing.

I swallowed nervously. *Did I just make a huge mistake?*

Up close, he was huge—and clearly not someone to fuck around with.

“Now that I think about it,” he said, his voice low, “we haven’t been properly introduced, have we, Luna of the Redwood pack? I’m Titus, the new Bitterfang second.”

*Oh shit. This must be the new Lance since, you know, Greyson killed him…*

Titus kept talking. “You may be a Luna, but I’d suggest you watch that pretty little mouth of yours.”

“You watch yours!” Lola snarled.

I squared my shoulders. Maybe he was big and scary, but I wasn’t going to allow him—or anyone else—to speak to me like that. “You clearly don’t know me very well.”

I turned on my heel, Lola on my heels, and strode away as quickly as I could without making it look like I was running. We needed to get to the meet-up point. If this conversation kept going, I was worried it would escalate to violence. Lola was strong, and I had my magic, but picking a fight with the new Bitterfang lieutenant right outside their encampment sounded like a suicide mission.

“I’ll see you after the closing ceremony tomorrow then!” Titus called after us. “All of you.”

A chill rippled down my spine. I knew a threat when I heard one.

# **Episode 4028**

**Greyson**

All of Lucian’s pompous smugness disappeared as he pushed past me, heading… I didn’t know where.

“Where are you going?” I called after him.

“I have to go see Elle,” he said. “I’ll track her down, convince her that this isn’t the way.”

I grabbed his arm. “Don’t. It will be too hard for her to say goodbye to you right now. She’s had a really hard night—she needs space, and she’s probably already long gone. You’d have your work cut off for you tracking her down, and your pack needs you.”

“No!” He jerked his arm out of my grip. “This is too dangerous! We’re on the brink of war! How could you have just let her leave?”

It was comforting, in a way, to see proof that Lucian truly cared about Elle. This wasn’t the Lucian who made grand romantic gestures ripped out of a period romance novel, or the conniving, arrogant prince who’d made my life hell on more than one occasion—this was an Alpha who thought his mate was in danger. His hackles were up, and his instincts were screaming at him to protect Elle.

I hadn’t realized he had it in him.

But this just wasn’t the right time for him to turn into a halfway decent person. We needed to get the hell away from the summit, not waste time bickering over a decision that had already been made. A decision that, ultimately, neither one of us had a say in, because it was Elle’s decision alone.

I sighed. “I know it’s complicated, but she needed to go.”

“No,” Lucian said stubbornly. “It’s not too late to find her. And as her Alpha, you can forbid her from leaving.”

I thought of Elle’s devastation, the way she’d looked like a shell of her former self. She wasn’t okay. And even though I hated the idea of her going off on her own as much as Lucian did, I trusted her to know what she needed. All I could do was hope that, in time, she’d come back.

“I won’t do that,” I said. “I won’t take away her decision.”

Lucian scowled. “If she’s really gone, then our alliance is officially over.”

My jaw dropped, and every ounce of goodwill I’d ever felt for the Vanguard Alpha crumbled to dust. “Are you shitting me? You can’t just hold the alliance over our heads every time you don’t get what you want! That’s not how loyalty and friendship work!”

The princeling’s eyes went wide. He looked like he’d just been slapped.

*If only*. I’d been desperate to beat some sense into this asshole for a long time now.

“W-What?” he spluttered. “You can’t talk to me like that! I’m of royal blood!”

“And you’re lucky I have enough restraint not to *spill* that so-called royal blood right now,” I snapped. “Unlike you, I know what it means to honor an alliance—and my word.”

“This *is* about my honor!” he roared. “You just let my mate *abandon* me? Without even telling me first?”

*Unbelievable. And yet fully believable. Trust Lucian to make Elle’s personal loss all about him.*

We really didn’t have time for this. I’d already wasted far too much time delivering Elle’s message. I needed to get back to my pack. If the Vanguards weren’t coming, that was on them. They weren’t my responsibility. Plus, I’d only passed along this message as a favor to Elle. I couldn’t give two shits what Lucian did next. I was about to tell him as much when Aysel stepped between us.

She put a hand on Lucian’s chest. “Brother, calm down. You know you don’t want to end the alliance with the Redwoods.” She glanced at me. “And Greyson, perhaps you can spare a bit of sympathy for my brother. You did spring all of this on him rather abruptly.”

I didn’t feel an ounce of fucking sympathy for the princeling, and Aysel was the last person qualified to give me a lecture on sympathy. But I forced myself to pull in a breath. This clearly wasn’t over, but we had bigger problems on our hands right now.

“We’ll talk again back home, when we’ve both cooled down,” I said.

Lucian didn’t respond, and he refused to look me in the eyes.

*Whatever. Message delivered.*

I hurried back to the camp, where I found Rishika pacing.

“Big Mac already went out beyond the edge of the encampment,” she said as I approached. “I’m worried the Bitterfangs will figure out what we’re doing if we do it here.”

I nodded. “That makes sense. Maybe we should move even farther out before blipping. Has Cali—”

Hurried footsteps crunched across the forest floor as Cali and Lola raced up.

“We just ran into Titus, the new Bitterfang second-in-command,” Cali said, panting.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine, but we have to go. Titus pretty much promised that things are going to escalate after the closing ceremony.”

I grimaced. I hated that Cali had been forced to face that guy alone. Then again, she’d had Lola with her. For all her flaws, Lola was a formidable fighter, and scrappy as hell. She’d never let anything happen to Cali if she could help it.

We hurried across the encampment as quietly as possible. Finally, we left the sea of tents behind and Rishika led us through the forest, to a clearing another half mile away.

Big Mac was sitting on the ground looking for all intents and purposes like she was meditating.

“Are you ready to do this?” I asked. “It’s a lot of people to blip—are you still feeling up to it?”

She stood with a scowl. “It’s not like I have much of a choice. But yes, once you all start arriving, I’m good to go.”

I nodded. “We’ll do it in groups since we’re waiting for the others. I don’t want anyone to be a sitting duck. I’ll stay behind until everyone’s through.”

“Fine,” she said curtly.

Cali’s eyes widened. “You’re not coming with us?”

I squeezed her hand. “This is how it has to be. I’m the Alpha. I’ll be right behind you. Don’t worry.”

I could tell she wanted to argue, but she must have seen the resolution in my face. Or maybe her run-in with Titus had scared her badly enough that she didn’t want to waste time arguing. She nodded and stood on her tiptoes to give me a kiss.

“I’ll see you soon,” she whispered.

Then Big Mac, Cali, Lola, Artemis, Jay, Ravi, and Rishika all held hands so Big Mac could blip them home. Just before they disappeared, I mind linked with Cali.

*I love you*, I told her.

Her voice slipped into my mind. *I love you, too.*

Then they were gone.

A second or so later, Big Mac was back.

“You okay?” I asked. “You look a little pale.”

She nodded. “It just takes a lot of energy to do this on a Wolf Moon. I told you, the first full moon of the year isn’t ideal for magic workings.”

She must’ve been feeling really terrible to have given me a straight response instead of her usual snark. At least Cali was out of danger. Now, I just needed to make sure the rest of the alliance packs got away from here and safely back on their own territories. Then I could start worrying about next steps.

*Hopefully it’s not too much of a shock to the pack house when everyone blips back out of the blue.*

But after the Bitterfangs had slashed our tents, and especially after Cali’s run-in with Titus, I knew we couldn’t stick around. We needed to get back home to the rest of the pack, where our defenses were strongest.

And apparently, we needed to prepare for war.

“I’m ready for the next group, if they decide to show up,” Big Mac said. It was just the two of us alone in the clearing now, since we’d sent all our luggage back with the others.

I cleared my throat. “Um… Thanks for everything you’re doing.”

“Whatever,” she grunted. “I’d rather be at home with Sabine, anyway.”

I nodded. “I know we ask a lot of you.”

“You can say that again,” she muttered.

*Okay… Maybe I’ve made things worse.* I was just trying to thank her for everything she’d done for us. But then again, Big Mac wasn’t exactly the kind of person who liked to be fawned over. Maybe it would be better if I said nothing at all.

Silence settled between us for a while before she asked, “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather I just blip you back now?”

I shook my head. “No, I stand by what I said. I’m the Alpha. I should be here. Plus, I want to keep an eye out for you.”

She rolled her eyes.

The wind shifted, and I tensed as I picked up the scent of another wolf.

“Get behind me!” I shouted, but it was too late.

The wolf was already here, and it was sinking its teeth into Big Mac.

# **Episode 4029**

**Xavier**

I brought up the rear of the line of Samara wolves heading away from the summit. Ava was up front, and we were making our way through the forest as quickly and quietly as we could. Greyson’s admonition for leading the Samaras away from the summit on foot was still ringing in my ears, but I knew we were doing the right thing. We’d already lost time waiting around for Greyson and the Redwoods to be ready to leave, and I had to ensure my own pack’s safety.

No, the best thing for us now was to make our own exit, even if it meant traveling back to Samara territory the old-fashioned way. It wouldn’t take long, in the end.

I glanced over my shoulder, back toward the summit encampment. *Have Cali and Greyson left yet?* I hoped so. I didn’t know all the specifics of what was going on with that Helix guy, but the Bitterfangs had put a target on the Redwoods, and on Cali and Greyson in particular. The sooner they got the hell out of there and returned to Redwood territory, the sooner I’d breathe easy.

I forced myself forward, gritting my teeth. *Focus on your own pack. You’re not a Redwood anymore.*

Even if my brain knew where my allegiances were meant to lie, my heart was still catching up. I still worried about the Redwoods—deep in my heart, that’s what I was. A Redwood wolf. But worrying about another pack wasn’t going to help my new pack right now.

Plus, the dream Adéluce had sent me still clung to the edges of my mind, haunting me even in wakefulness. I’d been forced to watch myself attempt to kill Cali, and just the memory of it made me sick. I liked to think I’d never be capable of such a thing in real life, but there was no ignoring the implicit threat that Adéluce had delivered. She was powerful—more powerful than I liked to admit. Was the idea that she could take control of me really so absurd? The idea that she could force me to do something as unspeakably evil as killing my mate?

Maybe it was a reminder—a metaphor more than a promise of compulsion. The message was still pretty damn clear: If Cali died, it would be my fault.

So, I was back at square one, then—I needed to remove Cali from my mind, even if I couldn’t remove her from my heart. The best thing I could do for her was let her go, let her be with Greyson, let her figure out how to be happy without me in her life.

It killed me to imagine that kind of future for her, but it was a hell of a lot better than having her death on my hands. I liked to think I could find some way to live without Cali, as long as I knew that she was thriving. But if she died, and it was my fault… There would be no coming back from that.

I knew I needed to keep moving, to focus on my pack and protect them throughout the journey home, but I lingered just a little bit longer, imagining myself at the end of some invisible tether that connected me to Cali and the Redwoods. If I left now, I’d have to let it go.

The wind shifted, and I tensed as the scent of blood filled my nose. A lot of blood.

Ava’s voice slipped into my mind. *Do you smell that?*

Even from her position at the front of our line, the scent was that potent.

*I do*.

*It smells… human*, Ava added.

My muscles coiled tighter as I inhaled deeply. Was it a coincidence that human blood had been spilled and the scent was coming from the Redwoods’ meet-up point? My jaw clenched as I realized the scent of the blood was familiar—though I couldn’t quite place it.

*It’s not Cali*, I reassured myself, with no small amount of relief. But the fact that I knew this person still had me on edge.

*Who is it?* Realization hit me. *Shit*.

I mind linked with Ava. *It’s Big Mac.*

*Fuck…* Clearly, she also realized what it meant that the witch had been harmed. Big Mac was the Redwoods’ way out of the summit and back to the safety of the pack house—if she was hurt, then they wouldn’t be able to blip. They could be trapped, fighting for their lives after some kind of ambush.

I couldn’t just stand here and let it happen. I had to do something. Cali could be there. The other Redwoods could be there—people I cared about. And if Big Mac had been hurt, then something terrible must have happened. Even with all the battles she’d fought in alongside the Redwood pack, I’d never smelled this much of her blood before.

I took off toward the scent.

*Xavier*, Ava called after me. *Come back!*

*Wait there*, I ordered.

I raced through the forest toward the scent of Big Mac’s blood. The scent grew stronger and stronger—*Jesus, is she bleeding out?*—and it didn’t take long for me to pick up on the sounds of fighting.

I broke through the tree line to find Greyson grappling with another wolf. I didn’t think twice—I jumped into the fray and fought side by side with my brother.

If Greyson was surprised by my sudden arrival, he didn’t show it. All the time we’d spent fighting together had us working in harmony. Greyson took on the frontal attack while I circled around to the rear to keep the wolf from running off.

The wolf didn’t back down, didn’t try to surrender or escape. If anything, he fought harder against the two of us than he had against Greyson alone. He struck out at any bit of us he could reach as he dodged our dual attack.

He slammed into me, knocking me to the side, then used the momentum to tackle Greyson, snapping at my brother’s throat. I lunged at him, sinking my own teeth into his shoulder before he could strike a killing blow.

As we tumbled to the ground in a tangle of limbs and fury, Greyson joined the fray and then we were working in tandem again. After a short scuffle, I pinned the now-bleeding wolf to the ground, and Greyson went for his throat.

Seconds later, he was dead.

We shifted back to human, panting as we stepped away from the dead wolf. There would be ramifications for killing this wolf while at the summit, but it was clear he’d been trying to kill Greyson and Big Mac. It had been self-defense.

Greyson rushed to Big Mac’s side. “Shit. How bad is it?” he asked her.

“What do you think?” she gritted out.

It was good that she was still conscious, though she was clearly in a world of pain. Her entire left side had been slashed open, from ribs to thigh. It was a long, bloody wound, but it didn’t seem fatal. At least not if she got help quickly.

Greyson grabbed the shreds of his post-shift clothing and used the strips to bind the worst of her injuries.

I looked at the dead wolf. “If they find out we killed him during the summit, they’ll come for us.”

“He attacked first,” Big Mac said through gritted teeth.

Greyson sighed. “That might not matter. It’s a zero-tolerance policy.”

The witch waved her hand and the earth beneath the wolf caved in, swallowing the body. “That’ll keep them from finding him for a bit. At least until your scent disappears. They won’t know when he died, or who killed him.”

I nodded. “Thanks for the cover.” I eyed the wounded witch and my brother. “I don’t figure you’re strong enough to blip yourselves back.”

Big Mac scowled. “You think?”

I met Greyson’s eyes. “Come on. We can all travel together on foot.”

Greyson didn’t seem to like that idea any more than I did, but there weren’t any better options available. He shifted back to his wolf form, and I helped Big Mac climb onto his back before shifting myself. The rest of the Samaras approached where we were.

Ava stepped forward as we approached and mind linked. *What’s going on? What happened to Big Mac?*

*A Bitterfang wolf attacked her*, I said.

*Is she going to be okay?*

*She’ll be better once we get her home.*

Knox stepped forward with a growl. *What the hell? Why are you helping them?*

*Don’t start with me*, I warned. *She’s injured, and their pack is already gone.*

*This puts us at risk!* Knox insisted. *They’re the ones Malakai wants!*

*You’re really sure you want this little shit in your pack?* Greyson asked conversationally.

*Knox, stop this*, Ava snapped. *You heard your Alpha.*

*I didn’t vote for him!*

My teeth ground together. If we hadn’t literally been running for our lives, I’d have been tempted to put this asshole in the ground once and for all.

*Get moving*, I snarled at him, *or we’re leaving you behind.*

*Helping them completely ruins our chance at safety!* Knox said. *If we do this, we’re never going to be able to cut a deal with Malakai.*

# **Episode 4030**

“Ugh,” I groaned, swaying on my feet.

Would I ever get used to blipping? It was always so disorienting. I breathed in slowly through my nose, staring at one spot until the world stopped spinning around me. Then I looked around and did a head count. Lola, Artemis, Ravi, Jay, and Rishika were all present and in possession of all their limbs—despite Big Mac’s dire warnings.

My shoulders heaved in relief. We’d made it back to the pack house. Big Mac wasn’t with us, but that probably just meant she’d already returned to Greyson so she could start blipping our allies. We were standing in the yard outside the pack house, and the mere sight of the house brought happy tears to my eyes.

We’d made it back. We were safe. The summit was finally over, and we were home. I knew I wouldn’t breathe easy until Big Mac and Greyson were back in one piece too, but it was so good to be home again. There were no Rogues, no Malakai and Honora. No hiding secrets from the werewolf council. Here, I could just be myself with the people I loved most.

We headed for the front porch, but I stopped short when I spotted a dark stain on the ground. “What’s that?”

Lola sniffed delicately. “Blood. Werewolf blood.”

“Oh my god!” My eyes widened, but then Lola quickly added, “Don’t worry. It doesn’t belong to anyone from the pack.”

“It probably belongs to that Bitterfang wolf—the one Charlie and Violet killed for attacking Mrs. Smith,” Rishika said.

Realization dawned. “Oh, right.”

I’d managed to completely forget about the attack. As relieved as I was that Mrs. Smith had recovered from that attack and nobody else had been hurt, coming home to find a stranger’s blood just beyond our doorstep had put a real damper on my good spirits.

*There’s no escaping the Bitterfangs.*

We sidestepped the bloodstain, and as we headed up the porch steps, Sage and Zainab came running up to us. They looked like they’d just gotten in from patrolling.

“What are you guys doing back already?” Sage asked.

Rishika walked them through the situation we’d left behind—namely the Bitterfang threat and our decision to make a quick, quiet getaway. As far as I knew, Greyson, Elle, and I were the only ones who knew the truth about what had happened to Helix. If the council ever connected the Rogue’s death to Elle or the Redwood pack, we’d have a whole new set of problems on our hands.

*One thing at a time*, I reminded myself. We’d figure out how to deal with the Bitterfangs first. If the council had a bone to pick with us too, well, they could get in line.

I looked into the house through the windows. It was dark. Most of the lights were off, and it was quiet. My parents and everyone else were probably asleep right now. It made sense—we *had* come back in the dead of night with no warning.

I’d catch up with them tomorrow—I didn’t want to wake anyone up. And as tense as our situation with the Bitterfangs was, it could wait until tomorrow. Besides, Greyson wasn’t even back yet, and he’d want to take the lead on our preparations.

I opened the front door as quietly as I could… and immediately let out a bloodcurdling scream.

A ghost was coming right at me!

I stumbled back into Artemis and instinctively summoned my magic. My shield was up, and just before my sword finished forming in my hand, the ghost stopped and frowned.

“What are you doing?” it demanded.

Its voice was familiar, even if its face was scary as hell. I let out a huff of relief. “*Jacs?*”

She was wearing some kind of white-ish grey cosmetic facial mask. She scowled. “Well, I do live here. Or have you been gone so long that you forgot?”

I was too relieved to be annoyed by her attitude. “Sorry! I just—”

Before I could explain myself, footsteps pounded on the stairs, and my parents came rushing down to meet us.

“Cali! Was that you?” my mom called. “Are you all right?”

“Artemis, you’re home too?” my dad added. “What’s going on?”

“We’re happy to see you, too,” Artemis drawled sarcastically.

Mom hugged us both, and Dad followed suit.

“Of course we’re glad to see you,” Mom said. “But why are you coming home in the middle of the night? I didn’t think the summit was over quite yet.”

“Well, it’s not,” I admitted.

I didn’t know how to explain everything that had happened without alarming them, but before I even got a chance to try, Mrs. Smith rushed down the stairs wrapped in a bathrobe. She looked at the group of us who’d just come through the door.

“You’re back!” she exclaimed. “But where are MacKenzie and Greyson?”

That, at least, I could explain. “Big Mac is blipping everyone in the alliance as they arrive at the meet-up spot, and we were first. Greyson is staying with her. They should be here soon.”

I hoped everything was going according to plan.

I swallowed the unease that crawled up my throat and tried to hide my concern. Against my will, my mind began to race with worst-case scenarios. What was taking them so long?

“But what are you all doing back?” Mrs. Smith pressed. “And in the middle of the night, too? MacKenzie didn’t say anything about it.”

“We decided to leave the summit early,” Lola said.

“Yes, I can see that, but why?” Mrs. Smith asked. “Did something happen?”

An uncomfortable silence filled the room as those of us who’d just escaped the summit all looked at one another. This was Greyson’s news to share with the pack. As the Alpha, he’d want to be the one to explain what had happened, and to lead any discussion about what came next.

“And where’s Elle?” Sage asked.

My stomach lurched. “She… Uh, she went to visit her family.”

I was so uncomfortable, my words sounded like a lie, even though they were technically true. They just didn’t include the full horrifying story of what had happened *before* Elle had decided to take off on her own. But I didn’t want to explain the whole Helix thing, even though the rest of the summit group didn’t really know what had happened, either. The wound was too fresh, and was it even my story to tell, anyway?

“What aren’t you telling us?” Mrs. Smith asked, her eyes narrowing.

Lola looked at Jay for help. He cleared his throat. “Well, um, things at the summit didn’t go the way we’d hoped, but Greyson can explain everything when he gets here.”

I slipped away from the group and headed down the hallway. Lola and Jay could handle things from here, and I needed the spotlight off for me, if only for a little while. But the moment I was alone, my worries over Greyson began to whirl through my mind again.

*Why aren’t they back yet?*

I entered Greyson’s study and closed the door behind me before trying to mind link.

*Greyson? Can you hear me? Where are you?*

Silence answered back.

I pulled in a deep breath. *Don’t worry*, I told myself. *It’s probably just the distance. Kira’s Luna mark spell must be wearing off.*

I glanced out the window and into the dark yard, searching for any sign of Greyson and Big Mac. But the yard was as quiet as it was empty.

Where *were* they?

A soft knock sounded on the study door and my parents stepped inside, looking worried.

“We heard what happened at the summit,” Mom said. “Jay did his best to try to save the full story for Greyson to tell, but Mrs. Smith made him tell her everything.”

I sighed. I’d hoped I wouldn’t have to explain the whole thing until I’d had a chance to figure out how to relay this information without giving my parents twin anxiety attacks.

“Things with the Bitterfangs aren’t so good,” I admitted.

My parents exchanged a look.

“We’ve decided to postpone our move back to Minnesota,” said Dad.

I gasped. “What?”

Before I could argue, Artemis stormed into the study. “You can’t do that,” she said. She must have overheard them on her way in.

“Exactly,” I said. “You need to leave before the—”

I stopped myself before the word *war* slipped through my lips.

My mother took my hand. “That’s exactly why we think we should stay. To help.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Artemis said.

“We know that,” Dad said. “But we’re still your parents.”

I swallowed. “I appreciate your support, but it would make Artemis and me feel a lot better if you were both far, far away from all this.”

“You think we’ll feel better knowing we’ve left our daughters to face off against those Bitterfang monsters?” Mom countered.

Before I could summon up a response, Rishika stormed in.

“Is Greyson here?” I asked hopefully.

She brushed past me, heading to the window. She looked out into the night and then turned to me. “I’m worried. Why aren’t they back yet?”

**Episode 4031**

**Greyson**

Wait a minute—was Xavier really going to make a deal with Malakai?I was stunned. We weren’t on the best of terms right now, but even so, I just couldn’t believe that Xavier would go to such lengths to betray me. I wondered what Malakai could have promised to make him even *consider* teaming up with him.

*What the hell is Knox talking about?* I growled to Xavier via mind link.

Xavier didn’t seem in any rush to answer. I stared unblinkingly at my brother as I waited for his response, not at all sure what to think.

Xavier was a lot of things—arrogant, hotheaded, strong, a cheater—but a backstabber? That was a new one. I never would’ve thought to apply that label to Xavier, but now I was considering it. And why shouldn’t I? He’d easily thought the worst of me after the first pack war, when I’d killed people who wanted to kill him and Colton—so why should I be so hesitant to think the worst of him? Especially when lately, he’d done nothing but show us how little loyalty he had to the Redwoods—or to his own family and loved ones, for that matter.

*Answer me, Xavier. What does Knox mean? What deal with Malakai?* I pressed.

I braced myself for his answer, hoping that he wasn’t about to confess to something that would officially tear him out of the alliance.

Xavier was as stoic as always when he finally answered. *It’s nothing. Knox is full of shit.*

I adjusted my pace slightly as I felt Big Mac’s grip on my neck loosening. I was worried that she might fall off my back and exacerbate her injuries. Unfortunately, I couldn’t afford to stop and shift back to check on her. Not just yet. We needed to get as far away from the summit grounds as possible. The others needed to hurry up. Once they were here, I’d be able to have a proper conversation with her.

*Believe me or don’t*,Xavier continued, *but there’s no reason for me to lie. And even if I did make a decision like that—which I didn’t—I wouldn’t bother to hide it from you. I have my own pack now, and whatever choices I make have nothing to do with you.*

*Then why did Knox say that?* I asked. *Paint the picture for me, Xavier. There’s no way Knox would just say it out of the blue—something must have happened.*

*So, you’re going to believe Knox over me? Do you know how insane that sounds? I’m telling you that nothing happened. Malakai came to me with a proposition, and I told him to go fuck himself. Got it?*

*Guess I have to just take your word for it, huh?*

I wanted to believe him, but he wasn’t making that easy lately. He’d lied about so many things—including his relationship with Ava. And then he’d kissed Cali, only to break the news about the Luna ceremony right afterward. He’d been hurting people left and right, lately. He wasn’t exactly in the running for man of the year right now.

*Drop it, okay?* Xavier snapped. *We were leaving on foot to ensure the safety of our pack, not some grand conspiracy plan. We’ll stay with you to protect the witch and wait for the other allied packs to arrive so we can reconfigure this…* plan*.*

I didn’t like the way Xavier referred to Big Mac as “your witch.” It made the division between our packs even clearer. Ultimately, though, I agreed—but not because Xavier had made a particularly compelling argument. I needed to focus on Big Mac right now, and on getting her to safety. I couldn’t let anything else happen to her. My mother was already going to be a mess when she learned about Big Mac’s injuries, and right now, the only thing that mattered was getting her back to the pack house in one piece.

*I’ll drop it for now, but this isn’t over*, I said.

*I have nothing to hide*, he said*.*

Xavier’s curt replies had barely scratched the surface of whatever it was that Malakai could have said to him. It was just like the Bitterfang Alpha, trying to interfere as soon as Xavier made an undeniable break from the Redwood pack with the Luna ceremony. It still blew my mind that I was even questioning whether or not my brother had entertained Malakai’s request in any way, but the last few days had made it clear that I didn’t know Xavier half as well as I’d thought.

*He might be hiding something*, I thought to myself. *Scratch that—he’s definitely hiding a lot of shit, but I can’t believe that he would betray the alliance and make a deal with the Bitterfangs. I’ll just have to get to the bottom of it after we get Big Mac safely back to the pack house.*

I realized then that I hadn’t made contact with Cali since Big Mac had blipped her back with the others. I needed to fill her in on what was happening so that she wouldn’t worry. I was sure that our unexpected delay had her on edge.

Hoping that our long-distance mind linking capabilities were still functioning, I reached out to her.

*Love?* I called.

For a moment, there was no response. But then her voice came through, faint, but there.

*Greyson? Greyson? Where are you? Are you okay? What’s going on?*

*I know, love, but Big Mac’s been injured. A wolf came out of nowhere and attacked her*,I said.

*What? Is she okay? That’s awful.*

*I know. But yes, she’s going to be okay. For now, though, blipping is out of the question, so we’re taking the long way home. Pass the message on to my mother and make sure to let her know that she shouldn’t worry. I’ll keep you updated as things progress.*

*Okay, Greyson. Stay safe. I love you.*

*Love you, too. See you soon!*

I felt a lot better after my conversation with Cali—almost good enough to forget the tension lingering in the air between me and Xavier. Things had changed so much between us in such a short time, and I was still wrapping my head around our new dynamic.

With everything that had happened, I wasn’t expecting our relationship to be like it was before—and things had never been even close to perfect between us—but I didn’t feel good about how much the ever-present rift between us had widened. It would have been so easy just to write Xavier off altogether, but we were in an alliance, so it wasn’t as simple as all that—not to mention that he was my brother.

As we waited in the spot where the other allied packs were supposed to meet up with us, Xavier stopped and circled back to face me.

*I’m not going to keep waiting around forever for the other packs to get here*,he said.

*I don’t understand why you’re being so impatient right now! Is this an alliance, or is it not?* I shot back.

Xavier was making everything harder than it had to be, and I was tired of it. It was just bizarre that he’d grown even more difficult since getting what I assumed that he’d wanted this whole time—his own pack and a Luna all to himself.

*It’s an alliance, yes, but shouldn’t you be asking yourself if standing around is the best move when Big Mac was just attacked?* Xavier paused and looked around, lifting his nose to the air, as if sniffing out any potential threats. *For all we know, it could happen again. We could be on the move, spreading ourselves out and making shit harder for whoever attacked her, but instead, we’re standing here having this conversation.*

Just as I was about to reply, Mace and the Blue Bloods came trotting through the trees. I sighed with relief. Now all we needed was Lucian and the Vanguards.

Mace’s gaze shifted to Big Mac. *What happened to her? How are we supposed to blip back with her injured?*

I was just about to tell them that we were going to have to make our way back on foot when I remembered that the Cobalt Luna was a witch.

*Hey, Mace, have the Cobalts left yet?* I asked. *Their Luna is a witch—Rowena. She could blip all of us back.*

Porter had been more than helpful since we’d met, so I imagined he wouldn’t mind lending us Rowena’s powers to help Big Mac get back to the pack house as quickly as possible.

But Mace shook his head. *I passed their camp on the way here, and it was empty. They must have split early, too.*

Shit.I shifted under Big Mac’s weight, hoping that she was holding up okay. I didn’t even want to think about what would happen if her condition worsened.

*Well, that’s that*, Xavier said bitterly. *Looks like we better get moving.*

**Episode 4032**

Greyson didn’t want me to worry, but I was beyond concerned. Big Mac being attacked was a big deal, even though Greyson was insisting that she was stable. This wasn’t good, and I wasn’t about to sit idle while my mate was in trouble. If Big Mac was injured, that meant that she couldn’t blip them back, since it would take energy that she probably didn’t have. Greyson hadn’t said it and he never would, but I assumed they needed help.

*And I know just where to get it.*

I looked around at Artemis, Rishika, and my parents.

“I need to find Kira, now,” I said, then I shot up from my seat and raced to Kira’s room. I felt bad that I was bothering her at such a strange hour and knew I’d be waking her up, but this was important. I needed her. The pack needed her.

I knocked on her door just as Artemis and Rishika came to join me. After a few seconds passed with no answer, I knocked again.

Kira’s sleepy voice came through the door. “Just a second.” A few moments later, the door opened. Kira’s eyes and face were puffy from sleep. “Cali, you’re back,” she said through a yawn. “What’s going on?”

“We need you to blip over to the summit. Can you do that?” I asked.

In my head, it all seemed simple enough. She just needed to head to the summit, find Greyson and the others, and blip them back. I wanted Greyson and Big Mac back as soon as possible, and this seemed like the easiest way to make that happen.

Kira looked taken aback and frowned as she processed what I’d said. I could tell that she wasn’t completely awake yet. “What? Why?”

“Seriously, what’s going on?” Rishika asked.

“It’s Big Mac. She was attacked and can’t blip everyone else back right now,” I said quickly. “I thought maybe that if Kira blipped over there, she’d be able to get everyone home instead.”

Kira nodded sleepily. “Okay, yeah, I can do that.”

She put up a finger to indicate that she needed a minute to get dressed, then closed her door.

“Did you talk to Greyson about this?” Rishika asked once the three of us were alone.

“No, not exactly,” I admitted. “I’m just trying to help, though. Greyson didn’t say how serious Big Mac’s injury was, but if it wasn’t bad, then wouldn’t they already be back by now? We have to do something, right? We can’t just sit here and wait for them to travel by foot when we have a way to get them back in seconds.”

Rishika shook her head, looking uneasy. “I don’t know about this, Cali. Using Kira isn’t as easy as it might seem. She doesn’t even know where everyone is, for a start. What if they’re moving around, after the attack? What if they’re somewhere she can’t find them? And besides, you’d be sending her to a place our pack is trying to escape because of the Bitterfang threat. You’ve seen how ruthless they are. Do you really want to send Kira there alone? The Bitterfangs could find her. Do you really want to take that risk?”

My stomach dropped. “I hadn’t thought of that. Maybe we can go with her?”

Artemis shot that idea down immediately. “No, Cali. Malakai has specifically targeted you. Greyson would kill us if we let you go back into the belly of the beast when he’s just managed to get you out.”

“And we need you here,” Rishika added. “The Bitterfangs have already attacked Mrs. Smith. If they come again, we’ll need to use all our defenses to protect the pack and the pack house. We need to be really smart about what we do next, and making a rash decision to go blipping back to the summit doesn’t seem right.”

“And there’s nothing to say that they *won’t* attack us here again,” Artemis said. “They really have it out for the Redwoods, and we can’t make it easy on them by leaving the pack house unprotected and sending our people back into their reach.”

I agreed with everything that Rishika and Artemis were saying, but I hated the idea of Greyson having to travel all that way on foot. It seemed dangerous—especially with Big Mac not at her best. What if the Bitterfangs started hunting them down? What if Big Mac got again, or her condition deteriorated while they were traveling?

“I know that what you’re saying is right, but I’m still worried about them,” I said.

“I know, Cali, but Greyson is an Alpha, and he’s hopefully with the other packs. They’re going to be okay. It’s best if Kira stays here where she can better help us if something goes wrong—and where she’ll be safer,” Rishika said.

I gave a reluctant nod, wishing that I could put my foot down… But I wasn’t really a Luna, and they were both making very good points. I didn’t want to push the issue, only to send Kira into a dangerous place and have her get hurt. If that happened, it would be completely on me. Not to mention that if she left and then the Bitterfangs attacked the pack house, we’d be left witch-less for the fight.

I sighed. I’d wanted a quick, easy way to get Greyson and the others back here safe, but Rishika was right. They were strong enough to make it back, and we were strong enough to defend the house. There wasn’t really any reason for me to interfere.

*If I were a true Luna, I’d do something to keep the pack safe until Greyson gets back… But what?*

“We should increase the patrols,” I said. “Make sure that no one catches us by surprise.”

Rishika smiled. “Already on it.”

She took Artemis’s hand, and they both turned and went downstairs.

I lingered outside Kira’s door, feeling a little better. Rishika’s smile had been validation—proof that I was doing the right thing. And if anyone knew the right thing to do at a time like this, it was Rishika.

Kira came walking out of her bedroom fully dressed and finally looking alert and awake. “Ready!”

“Kira, sorry!” I said. “I should’ve knocked to give you an update. The plan’s changed. You’re not going to have to blip anyone, at least for now. But we still might need your help if something unexpected comes up.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Kira said. “I have to admit, I’m kind of relieved that I don’t have to go back to the summit. That thing is intense. I can only imagine what it’s like there right now if you all left so early.”

“No, it’s definitely not the best environment at the moment,” I said.

I thought back to how quickly things had escalated, and my worry for Greyson and the others rose just a bit. I only hoped that they were moving quickly enough to outrun the Bitterfangs.

Kira and I went downstairs and joined Artemis and Rishika in the living room. I was amazed by how quickly Rishika had collected everyone for her patrol update. Most of the pack was gathered around her—including a sleepy Charlie, Violet, and Lilac, who’d come downstairs to join the rest of us. Seeing them made me realize just how much I’d missed the pack house. What I *hadn’t* missed was being in crisis—the default state for the Redwood pack.

*At least now I feel like I have more to offer. I’m not just a bystander, and I’m definitely not just in the way like I used to be. I might not be a real Luna—yet—but I’m ready to act like one.*

I smiled at my mother and father as they approached, but it fell slightly when I got a good look at the expressions on their faces. They looked like they had something on their minds. I pulled them to the side, away from the others.

“Cali, we thought about what you and your sister said, but we really think it’s best we stay. We’re family,” my dad said.

My mother reached out and squeezed my hand. “Your dad and I just want what’s best for you and Artemis, and staying here with you gives us a chance to help in the fight, and make sure you both stay safe.”

“Not to mention that we’ll miss you if we leave,” Dad added.

I paused, not exactly sure about how to respond without hurting their feelings or seeming ungrateful. I loved having my parents around, and it was true that we were family and should stick together, but I wasn’t a child anymore. I could—and needed to—stand on my own. Besides, it wasn’t like I didn’t have Artemis. With her by my side, I had all the protection I’d ever need.

I glanced over at Mrs. Smith. It finally looked like she’d completely recovered from her wounds, and I was happy to see it. Then it hit me.

I turned back to look at my parents. “The Bitterfangs attacked Greyson’s mother to get to him. What if they come after you next?”

**Episode 4033**

**Xavier**

I was itching to get going. The witch didn’t deserve any of my ire, but I had to admit that my frustration with Greyson was getting in the way of my compassion. Still, I was sorry that Big Mac was hurt. I wanted to help, especially since Cali cared so much about her—and, of course, about my brother—but none of that changed my desire to get the Samaras moving and far away from the summit.

*And that fucking Knox had better keep his mouth shut. He’s barely been back in the pack a day, and already he’s a huge pain in my ass. Just like I knew he would be.*

It was hard enough being an Alpha—especially with Greyson apparently trying his damnedest to out-Alpha me at every turn—without having to deal with an asshole werewolf who didn’t know when to shut up. I couldn’t afford to have Knox publicly arguing with me or showing any signs of disobedience. I was going to have to whip him into shape quickly before he caused any more problems.

I signaled to Greyson. *Let’s get going*, I mind linked.

*The Vanguards haven’t arrived yet*,Mace pointed out.

*Screw Lucian*,I shot back*. It’s his own fault if he’s late. Let them travel back on their own.*

The thought of traveling alongside the princeling was enough to turn my stomach. Now that I had my own pack and was calling the shots, I wasn’t in the mood to do anything that I didn’t want to do—and cavorting through the woods with Lucian was at the top of that list.

*We need the Vanguards*,Greyson argued. *There’s safety in numbers.*

*Shocker, another attempt to order me around*,I snarled, taking a few steps toward him.

*Don’t pay them any attention*, Ava told me. *Stay focused. You know what you’re doing, and you’re in control. Greyson can try to call the shots all he wants. Just ignore him.*

Lucian emerged from the woods only a moment later. He was dressed in some kind of flashy military outfit, complete with tassels, medals, and decorative cords looped over the shoulders. He looked absolutely ridiculous.

*Why the fuck did he bother putting all that on when he’s just going to shift out of it?*

I had to stop myself from telling him how stupid he looked.

Lucian clapped with obvious pleasure. “Ah, my allies! I’m so glad you’re all here—and smart enough to realize that you need the Vanguard pack to escort you to safety!”

I wasn’t in the mood for even a second of the princeling’s bullshit. I was about to tell everyone to get going, but Greyson beat me to it.

*Let’s get going*,Greyson mind linked to the group. *We have a lot of ground to cover.*

I nodded at my brother just as Lucian raised a bejeweled hand and flicked his wrist at the three waiting pack delegations.

“Follow me,” he ordered.

Immediately, I shifted back to human and stalked toward Lucian.

“That’s not your call to make. You aren’t running shit here,” I growled.

Greyson shifted too, throwing himself into my path. “Cool it, Xavier. We’re all working together here.”

Mace shifted back and stepped between us. “I agree with Greyson, we’re all doing our best here. We have to move forward. *Now*.”

Mace was right. If Lucian wanted to pretend he was in charge, fine. I stepped back and took a deep breath to calm myself.

“Fine,” I said. I looked back at my group, and then at the other groups milling around us, antsy and on edge—obviously taking their cues from us. “The sooner we leave, the sooner we get there.”

Without waiting for Greyson or Lucian to respond, I turned to Ava.

“Let’s get the hell out of here. Now.” I shifted again and got moving.

“Everyone follow my lead!” Lucian called.

If we were all going to work together, then the least Lucian could do was be less *annoying*. Luckily, I tuned him out and kept running, picking up speed as Ava fell into step beside me. I couldn’t have ignored the weight of this moment, even if I’d wanted to. I’d come to the summit as Alpha with Ava by my side as my mate, but I was leaving the summit with Ava as my Luna. So far, she’d proven herself as more than capable. I realized the importance of that, and the responsibility that we both had to the Samara pack. This wasn’t just about me anymore, and I needed to start acting like it.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Greyson, Lucian, and the others had fallen into place and were keeping pace behind us. I had to stay focused and not let any doubt creep into my head. Alpha was the role I was meant to have, and I’d be damned if I let anyone get in my way or ruin my progress. Even myself.

We’d been running for a while when Greyson’s voice broke through the comfortable silence in my head.

*Slow your pace*,he said.

*If we slow down, we’ll never cover as much ground as we’re trying to*,I said.

*It’s not about me*, Greyson said. *It’s Big Mac. I don’t think she can handle it.*

I looked back to see that the witch did appear to be struggling to hang on to Greyson’s neck. She looked downright sapped of energy, and her face was drawn with pain. That alone supported the pace we were all keeping—if we wanted to get Big Mac to safety where she could be healed, we had to hustle. But if she couldn’t hold on and fell off, that’d be another problem.

I slowed down a little, trying to find a medium between the speed I’d been running and how slow Greyson was going. We ran at that pace for a few more feet before I heard a thud. I turned to see that Big Mac had toppled off Greyson’s back and was lying on the ground.

Shit. She really was in bad shape.

I stopped instantly. I didn’t know how much this could set us back, but it’s not like leaving Big Mac was remotely an option. Not only had the witch repeatedly helped the Redwoods while I was still part of the pack, but I knew that Cali would be doing everything she could to help her. It was crazy that Cali still had such a hold over me—but wasn’t that what Adéluce wanted? To keep my love for Cali lingering within me as a painful reminder of the impossible situation she’d put me in? Once again, I was reminded that Adéluce had me right where she wanted me, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

Greyson had shifted back to human and was kneeling on the ground beside Big Mac.

*She doesn’t look good*, Ava mind linked.

*How can you tell?* I snorted as we trotted back toward them. *Big Mac never looks “good.” The woman has a perma-scowl.*

*That wolf really got her*, *Ava said.*

*I know. We have to get her back on Greyson and keep moving. If she can handle it.*

We moved closer, and Big Mac was pale, and her forehead was covered in a sheen of sweat. I couldn’t remember the last time she’d been attacked this badly. To her credit, she was hanging in there.

“Stop fussing over me. I’m okay,” Big Mac wheezed, slapping Greyson’s hand away as he tried to help her up. “I just lost my grip. Give me a minute to catch my breath, and I should be good to go.”

She sat up slowly and dragged herself to a fallen tree trunk, leaning against it.

Knox came walking up after we’d been waiting for a while. I knew that he was about to turn my already bad mood downright sour. Whatever commentary he had, I didn’t want to hear it.

*Why are we waiting for someone else’s witch?* Knox demanded.

*This is just going to make things easier for the Bitterfangs—or hadn’t you thought of that?* Blaine chimed in.

I looked coolly between them, trying to stick to my vow not to let Knox or anyone else get under my skin enough to make me lash out. I was going to try to keep the peace—but there was no way I was about to explain my reasoning to them. If they couldn’t figure out for themselves why we were stopped, then they were idiots.

*Keep your mouths shut and do as you’re told*,I growled. *I won’t tell you again.*

Knox glared and took a couple of steps back, but Blaine lingered, obviously wanting to challenge me. He wanted to be defiant? Okay.

In a second, I moved toward Blaine and pinned him under my paw, then bared my teeth and dropped my mouth so that it was only inches from his neck. He growled back, and I pressed down on him harder.

*Go on, Blaine*, I said. *You got something to say?*

**Episode 4034**

I could tell that my mother wanted to tell me why she and my father should stick around, and try to reassure me that they weren’t on the Bitterfangs’ radar, but I couldn’t be sure of that. The Bitterfangs were relentless, and they would stop at nothing to hurt the Redwoods in any way that they could. I’d never forgive myself if I let my parents get caught in the crossfire. Going back to a well populated place would definietly offer some protection.

“Mom, this is just the reality right now,” I said, before she could get a word in. “The Bitterfangs want nothing more than to hit us where it hurts, and the thought of anything happening to you and Dad is really more than I can handle.”

“Cali, that’s not going to happen,” my father said. “We’ve faced threats here before and come out okay. I see no reason why this time would be any different.”

I shook my head. “Dad, I know you’re trying to be positive, but we don’t know that. What happened to Mrs. Smith could happen to you. You didn’t meet Malakai and Honora—I did. I know what they’re capable of, and there’s no love lost there for me, or for anyone else in the Redwood pack. If it were up to me, I’d send Mrs. Smith away, too. But she’s a wolf, and she’s been a part of this world for way longer than me—”

“But, honey, I’m a werewolf now, too,” my dad said.

“Yes, Dad, but you only just turned. Plus, let’s not pretend that you’re a fighter. You’re a lover, Dad, and that’s why I love you. This isn’t your fight, and you don’t need to help us with this, I swear. I would really much rather have you somewhere safe—somewhere far away from here. If you stay here, it’ll be even more dangerous for me, because I’ll be distracted worrying about you both.”

My mom was quiet. I was starting to get a little nervous about what she was going to say. She’d seemed so adamant when she’d come up to me, and I was worried that she was going to push back even more.

“Mom, please,” I said, before she could open her mouth. “I know you don’t want to leave us here, but I’m not just Greyson’s mate anymore. The werewolf community sees me as his Luna. It puts a huge target on my back, and the backs of all the people I care about. I know that Artemis feels the same way, so please, do this for us. I only want to keep you safe.”

I waited for my mother’s response, unable to read her expression. I didn’t know what to do. It felt like everything kept going against us, and we’d been lucky so far—which meant that our luck could run out at any moment.

*I hope they see where I’m coming from and understand that it’s not that I don’t want them here, but that I’m literally* afraid *for them to be here. I think I’m starting to understand how Xavier and Greyson felt every time they wanted me to stay put or go somewhere else for my safety—but that was different.*

The mate bond had driven Xavier and Greyson to be overprotective—and thinking about that stung as I considered the state of my mate bond with Xavier. I couldn’t help it. Things had ended so abruptly between us that there were times when I forgot—for a split second—that everything had changed. It took everything I had not to slip into despair at that thought, but I couldn’t start thinking about Xavier right now. There were more pressing issues at hand.

*My mates’ concern for my safety is different than what I’m going through with my parents because I am my mates’ equal. I* should *be by their side protecting them, just like they protected me. It isn’t my parents’ job to do that. In fact, I need to protect* them, *and I can’t do that here. They have to get far, far away from the new threats plaguing the pack.*

Finally, my mother spoke. “Cali, if it really means that much to you that we leave…”

She sighed as her formerly blank expression morphed into obvious upset. A single tear trickled down her cheek.

My heart dropped, and I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, which began to quake as more tears fell. “Mom, I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry!”

She pulled away, wiping her tears. “Oh no, I’m fine, really. It’s just that everything you were saying kind of took me back for a moment. I remember having conversations just like this with your grandfather. I guess I just see so much of my father in you, Cali, and sometimes it takes me by surprise. To think that my little girl would grow up without her Fae mother teaching her everything, but still manage to become a beautiful Fae fighting machine!” Mom chuckled and shook her head.

“I like the sound of that… But I think ‘fighting machine’ is a stretch,” I said.

Mom shook her head and hugged me back. “Sounds like something a fighting machine would say,” she said. “Besides, even if you’re not quite a machine yet, you’re well on your way. You’re so strong, Cali, and powerful. And smart. So, if you really want us to leave and you think that’s what’s best, then…” She squeezed me tighter and buried her face in the crook of my neck. “Then we’ll leave.”

I sighed and relaxed against my mother, only at that moment really realizing how stressed I’d been about keeping my parents safe. I didn’t doubt that my mother and father were capable and that they could take care of themselves—or my mom, at least, and my dad trying his best—but that didn’t mean I was comfortable with them being in a situation that I *knew* might put them in over their heads.

“Thank you, Mom,” I said. “Thank you, Dad.”

My dad stepped forward and threw his arms around me, and Mom and squeezed us tight. It had been wonderful having them in the pack house all these months, but now it was time to close that chapter and let them get back to their lives. I kind of felt like a soldier going off to war, and I imagined that my parents felt like they were *sending* me off to war.

“We’ll find you to say goodbye before we leave,” my mother said as we broke apart.

“You’d better,” I replied. It was almost impossible to believe that they were really leaving.

My dad heaved a sigh. “Well, I guess we’d better start packing.” His voice was somber, but also a little cheerful.

“And we should go talk to Artemis, too, let her know the plan,” my mother said before she and my father both headed off.

I spotted Sage and Zainab heading out of the house to start their patrol, and a wave of crushing guilt washed over me. Every time there was some sort of threat, the werewolves took on all the responsibility of patrolling. I thought about what my mother had said about seeing my grandfather in me.

*Could I really be like my grandfather? A Fae warrior? Or like my mother put it, a Fae fighting machine?*

It certainly didn’t seem that way at the moment. I was standing here, inside and safe, while the others were out there making a difference and risking their lives on patrol to keep us all out of harm’s way.

There was no way I’d be able to keep up with Sage and Zainab, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t anything I could do to help.

“Where are you going?” Lola called as soon as I touched the doorknob.

“The Bitterfangs managed to attack Mrs. Smith by sneaking past the patrols, which means that despite everyone’s best efforts, the patrols aren’t enough to completely ensure the safety of the pack. This time, it wouldn’t hurt for me to do my own patrols—sort of like a second line of defense.”

An extra pair of eyes couldn’t hurt.

“You can’t go alone,” Lola said. “The patrols almost always go out in shifts of two. How about I come with you?”

I didn’t protest. I was glad to have Lola with me. A vampire-wolf hybrid and a half-Fae? Who was going to have the guts to mess with us?

We both went outside and started walking wide circles around the pack house. There was nothing, which was reassuring, but at the same time not… We were on our way back to the house when Lola stopped suddenly and threw out her arm to keep me from moving.

“What was that?” she asked.

I listened, wishing that I had the sensory abilities of either werewolves or vampires. Both could smell someone—or something—coming from a mile away.

“Look, over there!” Lola said, gesturing into a dark tangle of trees that didn’t look any different that the rest of the forest, as far as I could tell.

I squinted, trying to see through the darkness. I jumped when I saw something moving around in the shadows. My mouth went completely dry as I summoned my sword and held it at the ready.

**Episode 4035**

**Greyson**

I was busy tending to Big Mac, who was looking a lot worse than she had when we’d started out. When she’d fallen off my back, she’d landed right on the shoulder that the Bitterfang wolf had torn into, which was beyond unfortunate. I’d been hoping that the injury wasn’t so bad, but now it was clear that she was getting worse by the minute.

Unsurprisingly, her being wounded didn’t make her any more pleasant.

“Stop treating me like an old woman!” Big Mac snapped, slapping my hand away. She motioned to her bag. “Go in there and find the bag of thin red leaves with spiky edges.”

I stared at her in confusion for a second before I began to gingerly rummage around in her bag. I searched for the specific leaf she was asking for, but her bag was like MaryPoppins’s—deep as hell, and with so many compartments and pockets that my head started to spin. I didn’t know how she ever found anything in it.

“Um… What do the leaves look like again?”

“Give it to me!” Big Mac said sharply.

I held the bag out to her, and she snatched it away and started digging around inside without even looking.

“If you want something done with this group, you have to do it yourself. What would they do if I were as useless as they are? They’d probably all be cursed to hell and miserable,” she grumbled under her breath as she searched. Finally, she pulled out a bag full of the thin, reddish leaves she’d described. “Here!” She thrust the bag into my hand. “Put these on the places where the teeth pierced my skin.”

I took the bag and watched her try to struggle out of her jacket, partially exposing the nasty wound on her shoulder. I reached out to help her, gently peeling her bloody, sticky clothes away from the gash. With her direction, I began to place the leaves across the wound, apologizing every time she flinched.

“What are they supposed to do?” I asked as I placed the last leaf. Big Mac produced a roll of earth-toned gauze, and I gently wrapped it around her arm to keep the leaves in place.

“They should help with the pain,” she said. “It’s the best I can do for myself. I don’t have Kira’s knack for healing.” She exhaled when I was done and slumped back against the fallen tree. “Just give me a few minutes.”

I nodded and put the remaining leaves back in her bag—just as I heard a series of growls rise up behind me. I’d have known the sound of Xavier’s growl anywhere. I sighed.

Big Mac laughed. “Your brother’s really getting into the Alpha spirit, isn’t he?”

“You have no idea,” I grumbled as I helped her back into her shirt and gently slid her jacket back onto her shoulders.

Once Big Mac was dressed again, I hazarded a glance behind me. I wasn’t exactly sure what was going on, but it involved one of Knox’s little friends—Blaine, I was pretty sure. Xavier had him pinned against the ground and was growling in his face like he was seconds from ripping it off.

*I don’t envy my brother. They gave him a shit deal, saddling him with these assholes. What was the council thinking? It was one thing to spare Knox’s life, but quite another just to throw him and his buddies back into the same pack they’d terrorized. Makes absolutely no sense.*

But at the same time, I didn’t feel all that bad about it. The council had given Xavier a dose of his own medicine—and why not? An ass for an ass.

I groaned as I watched things escalating between Xavier and Blaine. Having a fight break out while we were trying to leave a very real threat didn’t exactly send that message of unity that was going to help us defeat the Bitterfangs. We needed everyone to stay focused on the task at hand.

“Let me know when you’re ready to travel,” I said to Big Mac.

As I looked at the altercation, I wondered what Cali would’ve done if she’d been here—and better yet, whether Xavier would even have behaved this way in front of her.

*Who knows? So much has changed with my brother.*

Ava shifted back to human and followed my gaze. “Let Xavier handle this. It’s Samara business. He doesn’t need you getting in the middle of it.”

I looked past her at the two snarling wolves, who were now literally at each other’s throats. “Wasn’t planning on it, but I hope you know we don’t have time for this.”

“That might be, but it’s good for Xavier,” Ava said. “He needs to draw some boundaries, and trust me—the last thing he wants right now is interference from his brother.”

*How odd to hear Ava suggest that I trust her. It’s almost funny. She hasn’t done much to warrant my trust—but I guess she’s right in this case. Xavier would only get pissed if I intervened, and it would probably escalate the situation even more.*

I took a step back. “Just make sure he gets his house in order.”

Ava fixed a hard gaze on me. “It’s *our* house now.”

“I’m ready to go!” Big Mac called out.

Without sparing Ava another glance, I turned back to the witch, wondering if I’d ever get used to the idea of Ava and Xavier. I doubted it—it seemed wrong in every way—but it was the new reality, and I supposed I was going to have to accept it, or at least tolerate it. It didn’t look like that situation was going to change anytime soon.

As I passed by Lucian and Mace, who were both currently human, I overheard Lucian arguing.

“He should be back by now!” the princeling was saying. “It’s been over an hour now.”

I stopped.

“Who should be back by now?” I asked Lucian.

Mace was the one who answered. “Lucian sent a scout ahead without telling anyone.”

“I wanted to make sure the path ahead was clear,” Lucian huffed. “Par for the course, as I’m sure you’ll agree.”

“But his scout hasn’t returned,” Mace added with obvious disdain. “And Lucian’s freaking out.”

“I’m not *freaking out*,” Lucian said. “I’m simply concerned. He’s one of my best scouts.”

I turned my attention to Aysel, who was standing silently next to her brother, her arms crossed. Her being so quiet at a time like this was very out of character. She had to be worried for once.

*There’s really only two options: either the Bitterfangs got him or he defected.* It wouldn’t shock me that there might be wolves among us who didn’t want the war. Hell, I didn’t want the war, but I would never leave my pack behind.

I glanced over at Maren, who was leaning against a nearby tree and watching everything unfold. I couldn’t deny that I was miffed at Mace for bringing her along. Maybe it was because of my old feelings toward her, but the truth was, the summit was no place for her. I’d meant it when I’d told Mace that he shouldn’t bring her. She had Fenrir to care for, and we’d ended up in a very dangerous situation. What if something happened to her out here? What would happen to Fenrir if she wasn’t around to care for him?

*It’s too late to worry about that now. Mace made the decision to bring her to the summit, and now she’s here. She’ll have to deal with the consequences, just like the rest of us.*

Big Mac had gotten to her feet, and a bit of color had returned to her face, but she was still in pain. It was obvious. “I’m ready,” she said.

To my relief, Xavier and Blaine had calmed down. The two wolves were standing far apart and not looking at each other, but Xavier had managed to get things back in order. For now.

“Let’s go,” I said. “We shouldn’t waste any more time.”

We all shifted, and Big Mac crawled onto my back and linked her arms around my neck. She lay down flat against me and dug her knees into my sides. She wasn’t the most considerate passenger I’d ever carried, but I knew she was doing it to ensure that she didn’t fall off again.

Within minutes, we were all running at near full speed, following Xavier. We hadn’t been running long when Xavier slowed… and I didn’t need to ask him why.

*Death*,I thought to myself. *I can smell it in the air. And it’s close by.*

I looked around as the fur on the back of my neck stood on end. The forest had grown eerily still and quiet. We all closed ranks and moved ahead cautiously.

Maren gasped when a bloodied body came into view, staked through the chest to a tree.

**Episode 4036**

I tensed up, taking a moment to marvel at the fact that I was holding a magic sword I’d conjured out of thin air. I’d come a long way from accidentally discharging wild balls of energy that I could barely control. At this rate, soon I’d be able to magic up an arsenal that rivaled Artemis’s beloved bag of weapons.

Lola had partially shifted and was wielding two hands full of sharp claws. “You’d better not cut my head off with that thing,” she whispered. “Stay sharp.”

I gave her a quick nod as I took a cautious step toward the movement we’d seen, trying to catch even the smallest glimpse of what—or who—was lurking out there in the woods. The feeling in the pit of my stomach was telling me that it was someone who meant us harm, and I had no plans to let them get close to the pack house.

“Smells like a werewolf,” Lola whispered.

*Bitterfang?* It was good we’d sent out patrols, and I was grateful that my parents hadn’t seen me heading out. What if they’d wanted to come along? The last thing I needed was them trying to prove to me why I should let them stick around. This whole ordeal further proved my point that it was dangerous for them to be here. What if they’d just gone out for a walk? Would they have ended up in the same boat as Mrs. Smith?

Lola and I took a few steps forward and I tripped over an exposed root, almost taking Lola’s head off with my sword.

Lola shot me a glare. “Do *not* do that again.”

*Sorry*, I mouthed.

My heart was racing. I’d prepared for this in my training with Artemis and Adair, and during the battles and fights I’d been involved in. I was a stronger fighter than I’d ever been… But none of that made me feel any braver.

I tightened my grip on my sword and let out a breath that thankfully took some of my nerves with it. I needed to focus and stay confident.

*You can do this, Cali*, I told myself. *Just stay calm and concentrate, like Adair taught you.*

Lola grabbed me, and we both froze.

“It stopped moving,” she breathed.

The Wolf Moon slid out from behind a cloud, and I could *just* see the outline of something lurking behind the trees. I thought about what the Bitterfangs had done to Mrs. Smith, savagely attacking her out of nowhere. I thought about how they’d threatened me, how they’d slashed our tents at the summit. At the same time, my run-ins with Honora played through my mind. Since the Bitterfangs had come into our lives, I’d been hunted, afraid, and on edge.

Funny thing, though—thinking about the reality of the fear the Bitterfangs had brought down on me and the people I cared about only made me angry. I raised my sword and charged forward, just as the figure in the darkness moved again. I heard a growl and braced myself for an attack, but instead, the werewolf stumbled back and ran away through the woods. I ran after it for a few yards, trying to keep up, but there was no way I could. Werewolves were much faster than Fae.

Lola came running up behind me.

“Hop on!” she called before shifting and pausing just long enough for me to climb onto her back. I was careful to keep my sword far away from Lola’s body as I linked my other arm around her neck and held on tight.

Lola took off after the wolf, fast enough that I almost flew off. The wind raked through my hair and felt refreshing on my skin, and I actually found myself enjoying the chase. Around the anxiety and fear that lingered, I felt anticipation and the burn of anger. They were coming for us, but we wouldn’t let them.

*If this really is a Bitterfang wolf, Lola and I might need their help. I want to protect the pack house, but I also don’t want to get in over my head. Greyson would lose his mind if I got hurt out here—or worse.*

Lola suddenly stopped, and I strained to see through the darkness ahead. We’d just run into a section of woods so thick, the moonlight could barely penetrate the canopy.

“What is it?” I whispered to Lola. “Do you see something?”

Lola wriggled to shoo me off her, then she lunged ahead before I’d fully found my footing. I tumbled to the ground and my sword flickered, nearly vanishing. I summoned all my concentration and only just managed to keep the magic alive and the sword solid. I needed it, and couldn’t afford to have it disappear right now.

I squinted into the darkness in the direction that Lola had gone, and soon heard a low growl capped off with a vicious snarl. I scrambled to my feet and took a few steps forward—just in time to see Lola collide with the other werewolf.

I took a deep breath and lowered my sword, then started to move slowly toward them. In the confusion and darkness, I couldn’t really tell which wolf was which. If I struck out at the wrong one, I could kill Lola, so I needed to be careful.

The two wolves tumbled to the ground and rolled into one of the few pools of moonlight. I could finally distinguish Lola’s brown fur from the white fur of the attacking wolf—and that was all I needed. Gritting my teeth and keeping my eyes riveted to my target, I charged forward and slashed at the wolf with my sword.

“Shit!” I hissed. I’d only managed to hit the wolf with the flat of the blade.

The wolf snarled and leapt at me, its heavy paws hitting my chest like a freight train and sending us both crashing to the ground.

I coughed and choked, trying to catch my breath. The wind had been almost completely knocked out of me, and I was struggling to recover. Somehow, I still had the sword gripped tightly in the other. Using every bit of strength I possessed, I sliced at the wolf as it came charging toward me and buried my sword in the soft spot between its neck and shoulder. Blood sprayed my face, and I squealed as it got in my eyes.

The wolf howled in pain and finally rolled off me. It fell to the ground, and Lola wasted no time ripping its throat out. The wolf fell still, and the woods were now completely silent except for my heavy breathing.

Lola shifted back and rushed to my side. “Are you okay? Did the wolf hurt you?”

I wiped my face with the edge of my shirt and took quick stock of how I felt. I was surprised to discover that I wasn’t hurt.

“I’m good. Just a little bruised from the fall,” I said, between breaths.

Lola helped me to my feet and we went to stand over the wolf.

“Is it dead?” I asked.

Lola spat out a glob of blood and licked her lips. “Double dead. I think you struck the killing blow with your sword, but I ripped out its throat just to make sure… And for a little nighttime snack.” She flashed a red-tinged grin at me. “You’re a real badass with that sword, you know that?”

“Really?”

“Yup. You would’ve made a great musketeer.”

I couldn’t believe it. My training had actually paid off. My skills definitely weren’t perfect, but I’d gotten the job done. I’d protected myself, helped protect Lola, and now felt even more confident in my ability to protect the pack as its Luna. I didn’t have the same abilities as a werewolf Luna, but I was starting to believe that I could still hold my own just as well.

*Should I feel bad? I mean, I did just help take a life…*

No. I didn’t feel bad. It had been kill or be killed, and we’d taken things into our own hands and done what we had to in order to protect ourselves. I actually felt a little exhilarated, high on adrenaline. It was a departure at the very least from how I’d felt after desposing of Seluna. This had been to protect myself and my pack.

Lola and I turned toward the sound of someone rushing through the woods and a few seconds later, Sage and Zainab appeared. They skidded to a stop when they saw us standing over the dead wolf, then shifted back to human.

“Are you both okay?” Sage asked. “What happened? We heard fighting and came as fast as we could.”

“We’re okay,” Lola assured them. “Better than okay, actually.” She gestured at the downed wolf. “We handled it.”

I was about to agree, but then a chill went down my spine. I peered into the darkness and shuddered. “What if that wolf wasn’t alone?”

**Episode 4037**

**Xavier**

I scowled at the scout’s limp body where it was pinned to the tree. It was a pretty gruesome sight. No matter how many dead bodies I’d seen and would continue to see, I never quite got used to stuff like this. Death wasn’t something to be paraded around or put on display, and the thought of someone doing this to Lucian’s scout turned my stomach.

I’d shifted back to human and was walking slowly around the body, already trying to see if the killer had left any clues behind.

“So much for your scout,” I said to a clearly devastated Lucian.

The princeling shot me an icy stare and I shrugged, then went back to my search. The first thing I’d noticed when we’d stopped to investigate was how fresh the blood was.

“Whoever did this is nearby,” I said. “They could still be watching us.”

*All the more reason to keep moving*, Greyson said.

He hadn’t shifted back, and he still had Big Mac resting on his back. Her eyes were closed, but she had what looked like a firm grip on his fur. She was probably in pain.

*It’s not that we can’t handle ourselves*, Greyson continued, *but I’m not interested in getting in a fight right now—especially one where we don’t exactly know what we might be up against.*

“No,” Lucian said. “I should be able to bury my pack member the right way. I can’t just leave him hanging there. It’s dishonorable!”

*I’m sorry, Lucian, but there isn’t time*, Greyson said. *Someone could be stalking us right at this very moment. We don’t want to lose anyone else.*

“He’s right, Lucian. We don’t have time for a burial.” I softened my tone just a little, but there was still an edge to my voice that always seemed to be there whenever I was dealing with the Vanguard Alpha. “But that’s up to you. If you want to stay behind and figure this out with your group and your group alone, then fine.”

*We shouldn’t split up the alliance*, Greyson said. *Can we just take the body back with us?*

I turned to look at him. “Won’t that just keep slowing us down, too?”

“Armin, take the stake out of his chest and get him down from there,” Lucian said. “We can at least cover him in leaves and lay him to rest at the base of that tree over there, away from where he was murdered.”

“Fine,” I said. I motioned to my pack members. “Let’s move.”

Greyson planted himself in front of me. *Don’t forget, this is an alliance*, he growled. *We move together, or not at all.*

“Look, I get it, but we don’t all deserve to get ambushed and potentially killed because of this. That goes for the Vanguards, too.”

“It’s fine, go on ahead,” Lucian said stonily. “I’ll catch up soon.”

“I really agree that we shouldn’t split up,” Mace said. “We’re stronger together. Isn’t that the whole point of this alliance?”

*He’s right*, Greyson said. *We need to stick together if we want to make it out of these woods alive.*

“Fine,” I said. I was growing more frustrated by the moment—I wasn’t trying to split us all up; I was trying to keep everyone from being killed. I only relaxed when Ava’s mind link filtered through to me.

*You’re smart to listen to them, X*,she said. *Our combined numbers are worth the wait. We’ll be able to break away from them soon enough, but maybe now’s not the time.*

I nodded slightly, then turned back to Greyson and the other Alphas.

“Let’s just try to be quick about it,” I said. “Let’s all pitch in where we need to.”

Greyson nodded, and I could see the relief in his eyes.

*See? He needs me more than he thinks he does.*

*I’m going to go do some recon around the area, see if I can find any footprints or scents*, Greyson said.

“I’ll go with you,” Mace said before shifting back to wolf form.

Greyson turned to leave, and the sudden movement caused Big Mac to slip from his back again. Her arms were completely limp, making me think that she really had fallen asleep—or was in a pain-induced stupor.

I rushed forward to catch her before she hit the ground, and Ava rushed to help me. Together, we lowered her gently to the forest floor.

Greyson immediately shifted back to human. “Is she okay?”

“Shit!” Big Mac hissed through clenched teeth. Her face was still covered in sweat, and she was as pale as ever. “I’m okay… I just can’t fucking hold on anymore. It’s taking a lot out of me—especially when I have to hold onto my stuff, too.”

Greyson ran a hand over his face and turned to Mace. “You go ahead and check for prints. I have to deal with this.”

I looked down at my brother and the witch. It was becoming clear that Big Mac wasn’t going to be able to keep traveling like this. Clinging to a wolf while they sped through the woods was a challenge even when the rider was in perfect health. I was genuinely impressed that Big Mac had lasted this long in the state she was in.

Aysel, who’d also shifted back to human, came walking over. “I don’t get it. Why can’t she just blip back?”

Big Mac scowled up at her. “Don’t you think I would if I could? I’m so tired of all you werewolves arguing nonstop, I’d be out of here in a second if I could manage it. It’s driving me fucking crazy!”

*It’s driving me crazy, too*,I thought to myself. *I should just take my people and go. I’m tired of the princeling’s bullshit.*

Aysel rolled her eyes, showing no sympathy at all. “It would be *so* much easier if you just poofed away. Then we’d be able to get this journey over with instead of stopping every few miles.”

“As your brother stops right now for his own reasons?” I asked.

Aysel huffed. “But we’ll never make it back at this rate.”

Big Mac gave Aysel a glare that would’ve turned her to stone if she’d been capable of that kind of magic. “In case your royal asswipe hasn’t noticed, I’m injured—and by one of your kind, no less. My magic was weakened by the attack, and this fucking Wolf Moon is making it all worse. If I try to ‘poof away,’ as you so eloquently put it, I could die. And if that happened, then my fiancée would kill me.”

I had to stop myself from smiling. Big Mac always had such a delicate way of expressing herself.

I glanced at Aysel. “Leave her be. You’re not helping.”

“Fine. I suppose I should help my brother anyway,” Aysel huffed before turning on her heel and stomping away to join Lucian.

I looked down at the witch, wondering how the hell her condition was going to get better any time soon. Aysel was being insensitive, but she was right. We couldn’t keep stopping—not that this latest delay was entirely Big Mac’s fault. I threw a glance at Lucian’s men, who were busy covering the dead scout’s body with leaves.

*We need to get this show back on the road.* I took a look around. *That fresh blood is worrying me. We could be attacked at any minute.*

“Ava, we’ll take Big Mac,” I said, making a split-second decision. “Put her on my back, and you ride with her to keep her from falling off.”

“She should ride with me,” Greyson said. “As my mother’s fiancée, she’s my responsibility.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “That hardly matters right now, Greyson. Just let me and my Luna help her.”

Greyson and I locked eyes and stared at each other, each waiting for the other to give. If my brother knew me at all, he’d realize that I wasn’t going to cave. What did he think I was going to do? Throw Big Mac overboard the first chance we got? Ava and I were much better suited to handle this right now, that was just a fact.

*Plus, there’s no way in hell Ava is riding with Greyson*, I thought to myself. *She’s my Luna, and it makes sense to have her with me. I was forced to share Cali with him, and I for damn sure am* not *about to share Ava with him in any way, shape, or form.*

“Is that okay with you?” Greyson asked Big Mac.

“Honestly, I don’t give a flying fuck as long as you all get me home,” Big Mac said.

I smiled again. That was Big Mac. At least she understood reason.

“Then it’s settled,” I said, looking my brother in the eyes.

I was just about to shift so we could get Big Mac on my back when I heard a chorus of growls. They sounded like they were coming from every direction. Everyone looked up as a group of wolves emerged from the trees.

**Episode 4038**

**Greyson**

I had almost no time to react before the wolves charged at us from all sides. Backing up so that I was against a tree and no one could come at me from behind, I tried to do a quick count, but there seemed to be more appearing every which way I looked.

I looked over at Big Mac. Ava was with her, and she was a good fighter. Satisfied that Ava would be able to hold her own and run interference for Big Mac, at least for the time being, I directed my attention elsewhere and prepared myself for the fight that I’d known was coming from the moment we’d been forced to escape the summit on foot.

The wolves were getting closer by the moment and rather than wait for them to reach us, I charged forward as they prepared to attack. I was immediately hit by two wolves who seemingly came out of nowhere, and they swiftly knocked me off-balance. I skidded across the ground and slammed into a tree with a sickening crack that sent tendrils of pain to every inch of my body.

Fighting to ignore the agony, I scrambled to my feet as the two sped off and only just managed to avoid another wolf who raced by, snapping its powerful jaws at me. I circled around and bit that wolf in the leg, and it howled in pain before turning and running off into the woods.

*Where’s Xavier? Why don’t I see him? He was right beside me when they attacked.*

I looked around for my brother and saw Mace embroiled in an intense fight with one of the wolves. He had the upper hand at the moment, but there was another wolf running at him from behind, and I snarled in Mace’s direction to alert him. Hearing me, Mace quickly lashed out and wounded the wolf he was facing off with before turning to attack the other one.

Hoping that Mace would be able to take things from there, I scanned the woods for Maren. In the distance, I saw Blaine rip out a wolf’s throat then howl in victory when the wolf’s blood sprayed all over him.

*It’s no wonder Xavier’s having a hard time with him. The guy’s a psychopath.*

Lucian, Armin, and Aysel were fighting shoulder to shoulder, working together to take out a couple of the wolves. I was actually kind of surprised. I’d never seen Aysel do much of anything but fawn over herself, but right now she was holding her own. She was faster than I would’ve thought. She quickly went from standing alongside the other two Vanguards to circling behind the snarling wolves and corralling them into a flurry of attacks from Lucian and Armin.

I was about to head their way to join their fight so we could keep picking them off when another wolf that appeared out of nowhere started advancing on me. I lunged, but the wolf scampered into the trees and out of sight. It was then that I realized their strategy. They were attacking in groups, swooping in only to retreat immediately, then circle back and attack from the opposite side. It was designed to keep us off balance. It was an unusual strategy, and it left me with no doubt in my mind—these weren’t Rogues, they were Bitterfangs. They had to be. This was a coordinated strike, not the kind of random onslaught that characterized most Rogue attacks.

I chased after the two wolves who’d knocked me down, realizing that Lucian was in pursuit of another one as he fell into step beside me. He was panting hard and his fur was splattered with blood, but he didn’t appear to be hurt.

*Have they no respect for the dead?* Lucian mind linked, furious. *We haven’t even had a chance to properly bury my scout! Have they no honor—or even a shred of decorum?*

*The dead are the last thing you should be worrying about*,I replied. *Unless you want to join them.*

Lucian sniffed at that, and we continued our pursuit of the wolves, which took us deeper into the woods. We soon lost sight of them, and started looking around to make sure that they hadn’t circled back to attack us from behind.

*This could be a trap*, Lucian said. *They might’ve goaded us into chasing them just to separate us from the others. I’ve studied battle strategy extensively, and—*

*This isn’t the time for a lecture*, I interrupted.

*Agreed*, Lucian said. *We should get back to the others. Onwards!*

Just as we circled back in the direction we’d come from, I spotted Maren. She was running right at a wolf, who was bearing down on her with its teeth bared and guttural, angry, growls escaping its mouth.

*Shit! She doesn’t stand a chance! I have to get to her.*

The wolf was almost twice her size, and there was no way I could sit back and watch while she literally looked death in the face. I broke away from Lucian and ran toward Maren, wondering what the hell she was thinking. She was Fae, but did she really think that she could take on a Bitterfang wolf all by herself? The Bitterfangs were a lot of things, but “bad fighters” wasn’t one of them. One wrong move could put her life in jeopardy. And why was she running *toward* the wolf when she should’ve been running away?

Once again, I cursed Mace for bringing Maren along and putting her in this situation. I knew he hadn’t done it on purpose, but he’d have to learn how to navigate being with someone who wasn’t a werewolf. He had to consider Maren’s limitations, especially when it came to the style of fighting that most werewolves were used to.

Maren was about to get in over her head, and I wouldn’t be able to forgive Mace if anything happened to her. For the sake of my relationship with Mace and the strength of the alliance, I had to make sure she was safe.

I increased my speed, worried that I wasn’t going to get to her in time. And then I saw it—the flash of a blade as Maren plunged a dagger into the wolf’s throat. The wolf let out a gurgling howl, then it tumbled head over heels and shuddered before going still. It was dead.

I reached Maren’s side just as she ripped the dagger free of the wolf and wiped the blood from the blade. She slipped it back into the sheath at her waist with a satisfied sigh. I nodded at her, impressed but not actually surprised, despite my earlier pessimism—I should’ve known that Maren would be able to handle herself. But fights like this were unpredictable, and she’d still taken a huge risk.

Lucian came rushing over, and I lowered my head. Maren nodded her understanding and hopped onto my back. The three of us made our way back to where we’d found the scout’s body—where the fighting had started. Mace immediately walked toward us, and Maren hopped off my back to join him.

I was just about to remind Mace that Maren shouldn’t be left alone when I caught sight of Big Mac, who was still propped up against the fallen tree—all alone, and with a Bitterfang wolf speeding toward her.

*Fuck. Why isn’t anyone else watching her? Where the fuck is Ava?*

I didn’t dwell on those questions for long. This was an intense fight, and there was no telling what had taken Ava away from her post.

To my surprise, Lucian charged toward the advancing wolf and tackled it to the ground before savagely ripping out its throat. Big Mac cringed away from the scene, covering her eyes. I wondered if she was afraid, or just trying to keep the blood from getting in her eyes. Either way, I was happy that Lucian had jumped in to take care of it.

*Good*,I thought. *One less Bitterfang to worry about.*

I still hadn’t spotted Xavier anywhere and I was growing worried despite myself. I took off in the direction of the last place I’d seen him—only to be rammed with so much force that my vision blanked for a fraction of a second.

By the time my eyes cleared and my head stopped spinning, I realized it was a Bitterfang wolf, its claws digging into a spot just below my neck. I held my ground, twisting and biting against the wolf to release its claws in me. The Bitterfang was growling, its canines bared and dripping with saliva. I could feel the heat of its breath as it snapped at my neck, clearly trying to rip out my throat.

I lunged to the side just before the wolf made contact, and only suffered a slight tear in the space between my neck and shoulder. I couldn’t give this wolf another chance to come at me like that. It was already straining and fighting to do what it had failed to do the first time, and the struggle of keeping it away had nearly gassed me out.

Gathering all the strength that I had, I flipped and vaulted the wolf off me. It went flying onto its back, but scrambled to its feet immediately. We both charged at each other, our snarls echoing through the trees and joining with the sounds of the other fights still raging around us.

I ducked low as we came together in a clash of teeth and claws. I bit into the wolf’s leg and slammed it to the ground, then quickly tore into its neck, sending a spray of blood into the air and flooding into my mouth.

I retreated from the dead wolf and took a quick look around, only to see that Big Mac had disappeared.

*Shit! Did I just lose my mother’s fiancée?*

**Episode 4039**

**Ava**

We were right in the middle of total chaos. The Bitterfangs had upended our group entirely, and we’d been scattered in every direction. I could barely defend myself, too busy trying to reorient myself enough to make my way back to where this had all started.

A wolf flew at me out of the darkness. I lunged at it, grazing its hind leg with my teeth, only for it to dance away and retreat into the cover of the woods. That was how it had been throughout the entire fight—a wolf would lunge out of the woods and hit me with a flurry of attacks, only to retreat into the shadows as quickly as it had come. It was clearly a planned assault, but I’d been holding my own against it so far. But that didn’t mean I was going to wait for my luck to run out.

I kept running, trying to make my way back to where I’d left Big Mac. It took me a moment to realize that Knox had appeared and was running right beside me.

*I’ve got your back, cousin*, Knox said. *These Bitterfang fucks are no match for the two of us.*

I didn’t have time to ponder whether or not he really had my back, as a wolf came tearing out of the woods and headed straight for us. Knox and I leapt up and pounced on the wolf in almost perfect sync, digging our teeth into its back and dragging it to the ground.

The wolf managed to toss us both off, and I narrowly avoided cracking my head against a tree. The wolf advanced and got the jump on me, sinking its teeth into my side. I yelped in pain and twisted out of its jaws—a move that sent another shock of pain through my flesh. Angry, I lunged for the wolf and pinned it to the ground, just as Knox did the same thing.

I sank my teeth into its throat, then ripped it out with a twist of my neck. Driven by bloodlust and anger, Knox and I kept ripping into the wolf until there wasn’t much left of it.

*If the Bitterfangs want to play these sorts of games, this is what they’re going to get!* I thought to myself. *They’ll think twice the next time they try to come at us like this.*

Knox and I moved away from the destroyed wolf and took a quick look around. As far as I could tell, the allied wolves had made a dent in the Bitterfang numbers, but I also hadn’t been able to get a good count of how many we were up against. For all I knew, there were dozens more lurking in the darkness, ready to pick us off.

I scanned the battlefield for Xavier, but I didn’t see him. *Where the hell is he?* I noticed that the Bitterfangs seemed to be retreating—or at least that was what they wanted us to think.

*Over there*,said Knox.

I followed Knox’s line of sight and spotted another Bitterfang.

*Let’s go*,I said. *Let’s take out every single one of these assholes.*

As we took off after the wolf, I spotted someone on the ground, struggling in the midst of all the chaos. It didn’t take me long to realize it was Big Mac. I wasn’t sure what to do. The witch had never been that fond of me—or of anyone, for that matter—but I knew the importance of having a witch right now, with everything that was going on. Not to mention that Xavier had some sort of attachment to her, and would be upset if anything happened to her—not that he’d ever admit it.

*You go on ahead. I have to go help her*, I said to Knox.

*I’m not leaving your side*, he replied. *I’m coming with you.*

*Suit yourself.*

I raced over to Big Mac, who skidded away from me and held her hands up like she was about to let off a blast of magic. I quickly shifted back to human.

“It’s me!” I said. “I’m here to protect you.”

“I’m fine,” Big Mac said, spitting blood onto the ground. “I don’t need any help.”

“Sure looks that way,” I said sarcastically.

Knox growled, and I quickly shifted back, wondering if the wolf who’d just started circling us was one who’d attacked us initially, or if it belonged to a fresh wave of attackers. I wasn’t sure—and it didn’t really matter. It would die, just like all the others who’d come to attack us.

Knox and I took the wolf down quickly, ripping into it from either side as it fought to get to Big Mac—its clear target. It made sense that the wolf would be so laser focused on Big Mac, considering the Bitterfangs weren’t fans of anyone who wasn’t a werewolf and absolutely hated anything that wasn’t “traditional.” Witches and magic seemed to fit that bill.

*Well, this witch is in our alliance, so they’re barking up the fucking wrong tree*, I thought grimly.

Knox and I had gotten a good jump on another wolf, but it was a big one and wasn’t going down easy, despite our savage attacks. The wolf was acting like we’d barely grazed it, and he lunged at Knox. My cousin deflected the initial attack, but the wolf turned right back around and grabbed him by the leg, then flung him against a tree like a ragdoll.

I planted my feet in front of Big Mac and growled, daring the wolf to come at me again and knowing that it was going to. I stalked back and forth, keeping an eye on the rear since Knox was still recovering. I growled, watching the wolf move toward me slowly, its large head slung low.

*You should have never started this*, the wolf mind linked. *You don’t have what it takes. None of you do.*

*We’ll see about that*,I replied.

The wolf lunged, and so did I. We collided like two battering rams and both fell heavily to the ground, scuffling and snapping at each other in the dirt. The wolf jumped up and landed hard enough on my chest to knock the wind right out of me. I coughed and rolled out of its way, realizing that I might not be able to withstand another blow like that.

*This wolf is powerful… And its fighting style isn’t the same as the others’.*

I vaguely remembered facing a similar style when we’d gone up against the Bitterfangs at the Redwood pack house a while ago.

Fighting the wolf one on one was difficult, and I was feeling the hindrance of not having Knox by my side to help. The wolf was fast. I’d finally managed to get to my feet and backed away just as quickly, only to lose my footing. I collapsed awkwardly to the ground, and the wolf wasted no time taking advantage. It moved quickly and pinned me to the ground, then lunged forward to try to take a chunk out of my neck. I lunged at the same time—only to stop cold, inches away from sinking my teeth into the wolf’s neck.

*Shit. They’re wearing silver necklaces!* It looked just like the one that had poisoned me last time.

I recoiled, and that was all the wolf needed. I fought and bucked and scrambled, but I wasn’t strong enough. The wolf sank its teeth into my shoulder, and I struggled against its hold, thrashing while trying to find a place to bite that wasn’t covered by the silver necklace.

The pain was excruciating, and I felt myself starting to fade. Then I heard a loud crack, and the wolf’s body flew up and away from me in an unnatural arc. The wolf’s head lolled to the side and then it went limp, falling on top of me like a ton of bricks. I quickly shoved it off me, happy to see that it was dead—and not a moment too soon.

I turned to see Big Mac braced against a tree, blood flowing out of her nose and her hand outstretched. She’d saved me.

I nodded at the witch, just as she fell back to rest against the tree with her eyes closed.

*This is better*, I thought as I boxed Big Mac in against the tree a bit. *This way, if any of the other Bitterfangs come out of the forest, they won’t be able to come at us from behind.*

I was ready. That had been a close call but, thanks to Big Mac, I’d survived. I could already feel the bite in my neck healing—but then I started to feel something else. A strong, horrible, burning sensation ripped through my body, radiating from my fresh Luna mark. My breath caught in my throat, and I scanned the shadowy woods around me as a sickening thought crossed my mind.

*Is something happening to my Alpha?*

**Episode 4040**

I didn’t like the idea that there might be more Bitterfangs lurking around the pack house, but after meeting Malakai and Honora, I couldn’t put it past them. They knew that the Redwoods and our allies had cleared out of the summit, and they probably knew that our Alpha and our witch were both stuck traveling home on foot. Honestly, this was the perfect time for the Bitterfangs to launch an attack.

“If that’s not the only wolf, then we should get back to the house,” Sage said. “They already attackedthe house once. For all we know, they’re trying to lure as many of us away as possible so that they can attack again.”

I thought back to what I’d said to my parents about them being targets and my heart sank. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

Without hesitation, we took off into the woods. My mind was racing almost as fast as my feet.

*Could someone really be trying to go after my parents right now? What about Mrs. Smith? Was this just a ploy to leave the pack house exposed so the Bitterfangs could attack again? How could I be so stupid? If that* is *what they’re up to, I made it so easy for them!*

The others had shifted back to wolf form mid-run, and Lola slowed beside me so I could take a running leap onto her back. I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around her neck, and we took off into the night.

Before long, I could see the lights of the pack house in the distance. It wasn’t lost on me that if I’d continued running on foot, I still would’ve been quite a ways away. It was definitely a boon to have werewolf speed at my disposal. It was the next best thing to having it myself.

I grew even more tense as we closed in on the pack house. Once again, I started worrying about Greyson and the others.

*Are they really okay? Could the woods outside the summit be teeming with Bitterfangs? What if they’re in trouble, and Greyson just didn’t get a chance to reach out to me?*

My panic rising, I reached out to long distance mind link with Greyson. *Greyson! Can you hear me? Is everything okay? How far away are you?*

I waited, but there was only silence. Fear and stress bloomed larger in my stomach. I took a frantic look around the woods, wishing that I had werewolf eyes and could see better in the dark.

I gripped Lola tightly as I kept scanning the forest, holding on as she weaved expertly through the trees. Then something caught my eye. I blinked, and it was gone.

*Shit. Did I really see something, or am I just paranoid at this point?*

I wasn’t sure if I could trust myself right now. Something in my gut told me that it could just be another attempt to lure us away from the house. If I was wrong and it turned out to be nothing, then we’d be lucky.

I thought back to the wolf we’d just killed in the forest. I was sure that it hadn’t expected me and Lola to be so formidable… And I was a little surprised by how well we’d fought together, too. That was probably the only reason why we were alive right now.

*If there really was something out there, the wolves would’ve noticed it by now, right?* I told myself. *With their amazing senses, there’s no way a pack of Bitterfangs could get the jump on us.*

I was trying to convince myself that everything was okay, but I wasn’t entirely sure if that was true. What if the breeze wasn’t blowing in the right direction for Sage, Zainab, and Lola to catch the unknown something’s scent? The only thing that gave me a bit of comfort was the fact that the Bitterfangs didn’t seem like the type of pack to use magic. They had so much hatred for every non-werewolf kind of supernatural, I doubted that they’d use a witch to conceal their scent.

*Hell, they’d rather burn a witch at the stake than use their magic, even for their own benefit.*

As we approached the house, everything looked calm and normal. Lola slowed and stooped down so I could climb off her back. I rushed up the steps and burst through the front door.

“Is everyone okay in here?” I yelled. Then I looked around, surprised to see that almost everyone was awake, now.

Jacs, Adair, Dani, and Tabitha got up when we came in, their expressions concerned.

“What’s going on?” Tabitha asked. “We’re okay, but are you?”

“Yes, we’re fine,” I said.

“Good,” Adair said. “What happened out there?”

My mother stepped forward with wide eyes. “Cali, you’re covered in blood!”

I shook my head. “It’s not mine. It’s from a Bitterfang wolf. At least we think it was a Bitterfang.”

“We didn’t really stop to ask questions,” Lola added with a smirk.

“All we know was that there was a strange wolf out in the woods, and there could be others,” I said. “We’re going on lockdown.”

Rishika came up, scanning all of us and clearly taking note of the blood. “I agree,” she said. “A lockdown sounds like the best move right now.”

I felt a surge of pride when Rishika cosigned my suggestion. I was really starting to get the hang of this leadership thing. Once again, I realized I was falling into my Luna role quite well, even though I hadn’t taken the official leap yet.

“I want everyone to be on high alert,” Rishika said. “Everyone needs to keep an eye on every window, every door—any place someone could use to get into the house. No one comes in, no one goes out—got it?”

Everyone was nodding, but I could tell that they were nervous and scared. I was, too, but I tried to fall back on what my mother had said about me being a Fae fighting machine. If that was true—and the fight I’d been in earlier suggested that it just might be—I needed to tap into the idea and draw strength from it. I had to believe that even if someone did try to come in and hurt us, I’d be able to stand my ground and fight them, like I had before.

“We’re Redwoods, and we can do this,” I said firmly. “We’ve gotten through so many tough times together. I know that more tough times are the last thing any of us want, but together, we’re strong. Just remember that, and we’ll get through this.”

I tried to smile, but it didn’t come easily and felt more like a grimace. I hoped that no one noticed.

“Greyson will be home soon,” I continued. “Or at least he should be. We can hold this place down until then, can’t we?”

There was a smattering of agreements.

*Barely any enthusiasm… That’s a little awkward, I guess. But who can blame them? This sucks, and once again, they have to be on edge in the face of the unknown. I get why they’re hesitant.*

It was obvious that Rishika’s and my instructions had only served to freak everyone out. Tabitha and Dani’s gazes kept darting toward the front door and the windows. My parents were both wearing skeptical looks, and I just knew they were thinking that leaving seemed like the worst idea right now.

I was trying to think of something else to say when Gabriel came walking down the stairs, shirtless and yawning. Mikah was right behind him.

It felt good to see them, despite the current… situation. It felt like it had been so long. Honestly, the Bitterfang threat made me even more glad that they’d stuck around. Gabriel was Xavier’s friend, so it would’ve made sense for him to take off, but he and Mikah definitely made our ranks stronger.

“What the hell’s going on down here?” Gabriel asked.

Right. I still wasn’t sure what to say.

“Oh, just a war,” Artemis said. She’d been sitting quietly in a corner, observing.

“A war? And no one thought to wake us up?” Gabriel demanded.

“Oh…” I said lamely. “Well, it’s been kind of a lot. Everything happened so fast, and… You know how it is. We were just attacked outside, and we think that the Bitterfangs might be gearing up for a strike against the pack house. So, we’re going on lockdown. No one leaves, and we’re keeping an eye on the windows and doors, that sort of thing.” I looked to Rishika for help. “I’m not really sure what else we can do. Fighting is always an option, I guess, but right now we have limited numbers and no Alpha, so…”

*Shoot. I’m floundering.* I took a look around the room. I might’ve been imagining it, but I was pretty sure everyone looked even more nervous and uncertain than they had a few seconds ago.

Gabriel rolled his eyes, looked at Mikah, and then went back upstairs.

I bit my lip and looked around the room, embarrassed. *Great. One of the strongest wolves in the house thinks I’m a total idiot and just left to get away from me. That bodes well for us. Not.*

I was about to start talking again when Gabriel clomped back down the stairs holding a huge weapon braced against his hip. He smiled as he presented it to the room, and then his gaze came to rest on me.

“So, Cali,” he said. “Ever used one of these?”

**Episode 4041**

I gasped whenGabriel stomped down the stairs. He was holding a giant weapon that looked like a bazooka on steroids. With a shit-eating grin on his face, he said, “Say hello to my *big* friend!”

He topped off that marvelous statement by waving the monster around.

*Oh my god.*

Everybody ducked—Lola grabbed my arm to pull me down when she realized I was too busy gaping at Gabriel—and started yelling at Gabriel.

“What the hell, dude?”

“Watch what you’re doing!”

“We haven’t survived a million years’ worth of drama for you to just kill us all with that thing!”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Y’all are so dramatic—it’s not even loaded!” He paused, waggling his eyebrows. “Yet.”

“He’s out of control,” Artemis breathed.

Jacs shrugged. “Kinda hot.”

Rishika shot me a look. “Do you want me to take over?”

“It’s fine,” I said—lied. The urge to rub my temples like a fed-up mom intensified, and I turned to our resident oversized murderous toddler. “Gabriel, what is that, and where did you get it?”

Gabriel shrugged. “It’s a little something I picked up during a job for MIB…” His expression darkened all of a sudden. “Though I will deny that with my last breath if anyone asks.”

Mikah stared at Gabriel with the most confused look I’d ever seen in my life. “Gabriel,” he said firmly, “you’re not using that. Remember what happened in Montana?”

“What happened in Montana?” Sage hissed in the background.

“Do we know what happened in Montana?” Dani asked Tabitha.

“Montana wasn’t my fault!” Gabriel glared at Mikah.

“Nobody wants to know what happened in Montana,” Adair deadpanned.

For once, I agreed with Adair. That weapon looked like it could wipe out the entire pack house if Gabriel accidentally shot it. The fact that he was getting all antsy wasn’t helping at all.

“You know what?” He pointed at Mikah with his free hand. “You always fucking do this!”

I had never heard Mikah shout before. “Do what, Gabriel? What?”

“You don’t trust me! You always think I’m being reckless when my recklessness has saved your ass time and time again!”

“And it has put *your* ass in danger, so—”

“What the hell do I need to do for you to finally trust me, Mikah?”

As the two yelled at each other, Gabriel continued swinging the weapon around randomly, while everybody ducked and screamed. Since I couldn’t exactly blast that thing out of his hands without hurting him, I turned to Rishika and said, “Please deal with it.”

Rishika nodded.

“Of course I trust you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t worry about you,” Mikah said.

Gabriel grinned. “You worry about me?”

Mikah rolled his eyes.

Rishika ran, grabbed the end of the bannister and did a backflip, jumping over the handrail to land on the stairs between Gabriel and Mikah.

Gabriel blinked at her. “Hey! Parkour!”

Rishika grabbed the weapon from his hands. “Both of you, cut it out!” she barked. “We need to focus on the Bitterfang problem!”

Gabriel made a move to take the weapon back, scoffing, “But that’s what I’m saying—it won’t be a problem if Bess has anything to do with it!”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” I huffed, taking several steps closer to Gabriel now that Rishika had the weapon. *Phew*. “*Who* is Bess?”

Gabriel chuckled. “Um, Rishika just stole her from me? I told you, it’s not loaded!”

“It’s not,” Mikah said, and only then did Rishika allow Gabriel to take the weapon back.

Gabriel grinned at Mikah. “Aww, you do trust me! Bess and I appreciate it.”

“Bess is the name of a cute cow, Gabriel, not the name of a weapon that looks like it’s out of a cartoon,” I said wryly.

Gabriel gasped, covering Bess’s… whatever that part was. “Don’t let her hear you say that.”

How was this my life?

“You should take her outside, Gabriel!” Jacs called, clapping her hands together. “Shoot something!”

Gabriel laughed. “That’s a goddamn genius idea if I ever heard one!”

“We are all going to die,” Adair added helpfully in the background, while everybody else started arguing. I was just about done here. Before Gabriel could get to the door and outside to murder some poor tree, I blocked his way.

“Gabriel,” I said firmly, staring up at him. “You will not be using Bess, or any other weapon like her.”

“But—”

“This is not a debate, Gabriel. *No*.”

I realized everybody had stopped talking and arguing all around me. They watched as Gabriel and I stared each other down. I realized that this was my opportunity. I had to show some leadership and get this situation under control. The Luna mark on my shoulder was a fake, but I still had to have a say here if I ever wanted to be a real Luna. So, I made my case, choosing my words carefully.

“We’re a werewolf pack, armed with vampires, witches, and Fae,” I told Gabriel. “We should be able to handle this without weapons made by humans. I don’t want to bring Bess into this situation.”

Gabriel huffed. “Fine. But if you need Bess, she’s ready, willing, and able.”

Mikah crossed his arms over his chest. “We don’t need Bess. Put it away, somewhere safe this time.”

Gabriel shot Mikah an annoyed look. “I thought you trusted me.”

“You *know* what happened in Montana, Gabriel.”

Grumbling under his breath, Gabriel stomped upstairs. I exhaled in relief.

“So, what’s the plan?” Rishika asked.

*Huh*, I thought, pausing. *I didn’t get that far!*

“I don’t have a plan beyond locking down the house,” I admitted to Rishika. “I just didn’t trust that Gabriel wouldn’t blow us all to pieces with that thing.”

“He wouldn’t do it on *purpose*,” Mikah said. He had a tone, as if only he was allowed to talk shit about Gabriel’s recklessness.

“I know, but we can’t risk any accidents right now. I know you agree,” I told Mikah. He gave a tight nod. I turned to Rishika again. “At this point, the first thing we need to do is to watch the woods, see if there are more Bitterfangs.”

“I can go on a covert scouting patrol,” Ravi spoke up, stepping forward.

I shook my head. “I don’t like the idea of anyone going alone into the woods right now.” I looked around. “We should have people posted on the front and back porches, maybe someone on the roof.”

“I’ll take the rooftop!” Gabriel shouted from upstairs. “Parkour, baby!”

Mikah sighed. “I’ll go with Gabriel to make sure he doesn’t fall off.”

Gabriel yelled, “I heard that!”

Mikah sighed again and headed upstairs.

Lola said, “Jay and I can take the rear porch.”

“You and I can take the front porch shift—right, Cali?” Artemis asked.

Just as I nodded, Rishika said, “No offense, but Fae can’t hear, smell, or see as well as werewolves. I’ll come with you.”

A few minutes later, Rishika, Artemis, and I lurked on the front porch, staring out into the darkness.

“Do you sense anything?” Artemis asked her girlfriend.

Rishika shook her head. “No. But we should stay vigilant.”

I didn’t want my imagination to get the best of me, but every shadow, every rustle of the branches made my heart skip. I wished Greyson were here already—something about his presence always put me at ease. I was trying my best here to take charge and be a Luna, but everything was easier when he was with me. He and I were a team.

“How are you holding up?” Artemis asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I turned to her, shaking my head. “Gabriel is Gabriel. He means well, but—”

“No, I’m talking about Xavier becoming Samara Alpha and choosing Ava as his Luna,” Artemis said blandly.

Rishika sighed. “This is not the time, Artemis.”

*Is there ever a good time, though?*

“It’s fine,” I muttered to Rishika. “We’ll have to have this conversation anyway. I can’t avoid it forever.”

Rishika didn’t say anything, so I turned to Artemis. In an even voice, as if I were talking about the weather, I admitted, “I don’t think I’ve fully processed it. And I don’t really want to. I’m already heartbroken, stunned, and unsure what to think or feel. So I just avoid dwelling on it and try my best to be a good Luna.”

*It’s one of the reasons I’m trying so hard to do a good job here*, I added mentally. *It keeps my mind from dwelling on Xavier.*

“You don’t have to…”

A noise from the woods cut off Artemis. All three of us whirled in the direction of the sound. My fingers tingled, my magic springing up to the surface immediately. Did I dismiss Gabriel and his weapon too soon? Could Bess really be the solution to all our problems?

“It’s just an owl,” Rishika said.

I exhaled in relief. “Good thing we have you here. I was about to blast that poor bird.”

Rishika snorted.

“What I wanted to say before the owl interrupted,” Artemis started again, “is that you don’t have to keep being the Redwood Luna, Cali.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Artemis shrugged. “We’re no longer at the summit, and the Luna mark isn’t real…” My sister paused, eyeing me. “Unless you’re ready to *make* it real?”

**Episode 4042**

**Xavier**

I chased after the giant brown wolf before me. This Bitterfang asshole had bitten my fucking leg and gotten a taste of my blood. I figured it was only fair I returned the favor—only my response would be to kill him. One less of those motherfuckers running around was always a good thing. But I needed to make sure he had nobody else with him. I also had to be careful not to go too far from the others.

No matter—this would be easy. I realized that when I saw the Bitterfang scurry into a thick stand of tall bushes. I had to laugh. Did my opponent think he could hide from me like a damn weasel? My wolf scoffed as I jumped over the bushes, ready to land on top of that asshole, when—

I saw that he wasn’t alone.

*Fuck.*

There were three Bitterfang wolves in the clearing, all growling and slowly closing in on me. Bad odds. I couldn’t believe I’d been drawn into an ambush—that was such an amateur mistake on my part. I had no backup, so I was going to have to take them all on by myself.

It was risky, but the alternative would be to turn around, baiting them to give chase until I lured them in the direction of Greyson, Ava, Mace, and the rest. Showing Greyson that I needed reinforcements was off the table, though. Besides, even if there were three wolves here, I was an Alpha.

They might know how to fight, but I was stronger, faster, and, also, so fucking pissed off that I saw red. My anger didn’t only have to do with the Bitterfangs. It had been growing, brewing constantly, and the reasons were many.

Adéluce was still out there, ready to torture me at a moment’s notice. I was Alpha of the Samara pack, not the Redwood. Ava was my Luna, not Cali. Knox, Blaine, and Zipper were a fucking pain in the ass. And just having to be in an alliance with the princeling was the cherry on top of the shit sundae I’d been served.

*Are you scared, Samara Alpha?* one of the Bitterfangs mind linked with a sneer.

*No*, I replied.

Growling, I charged at the wolf closest to me. We crashed to the ground in a flurry of claws, fangs, and fur. With a howl, the other two followed, jumping into the fray. A second later, I felt a sharp pain in my left shoulder. One of them had bitten me. It hurt, but what it did above all was piss me off even more.

I kicked off the Bitterfang that had bitten me and snapped at the other one on top of me. That gave me a few seconds, and they were enough. I opened my mouth and dug my teeth into the wolf I’d charged. His throat was easy to tear out, and he was gone in a heartbeat.

When I jumped around to face the other two, they charged at me at once. I sliced through one’s chest. He yelped, stumbling backward, just as I lunged at the other one. I pinned him on the ground. His heart was hammering under my paws as I growled over his head, opening my jaws to finish him off.

A sudden pain in the back of my neck forced me to stop.

For a few seconds, I lost my focus as I fell to the ground. The Bitterfang slipped out from under me. I snarled, whirling around to see him and the other werewolf stumbling over each other, both whining in pain, before they turned and ran off. I rushed to my feet, ignoring my own pain, as I started to chase after them. Then I stopped myself.

*No*.

How the fuck did I know they weren’t leading me into another ambush? One with more wolves? I couldn’t go rogue here and track them down. It wasn’t just my ass that I had to worry about right now—I was an Alpha, and I had to take care of my pack. I had to return.

With a growl, I whirled around and started running in the direction of the other packs. My wounds were already healing, though the bite on my shoulder was still bleeding and painful as I raced through the woods. Soon enough, I heard the sounds of fighting. The first thing I saw was Ava defending Big Mac against a large, dark grey Bitterfang.

Leaning against a tree, Big Mac was bleeding, pale, and breathing hard. Shit. Ava’s wolf was giving it her all protecting her, and it was a weird thing to witness. Not because Ava didn’t know what she was doing—on the contrary, she’d always been a great fighter. But I had never imagined she would care about the Redwood witch enough to put herself in danger. My wolf growled on the inside. Ava was in danger, and I had to protect her.

*Stay with Big Mac*, I mind linked to Ava. *I’ve got this one.*

My growl this time was loud, echoing through the woods. It distracted the grey Bitterfang, who whirled around to face me. With a howl, I leaped on him, and it was on. At the first swipe of his claws, I could tell that this one was faster, more powerful than the others. I was glad Ava hadn’t been forced to face him alone.

I went on the defensive for a beat, letting the wolf charge at me repeatedly, tiring him out before I attacked when he least expected and slashed through his chest. He roared in pain, stumbling backward. I jumped on him, shoving him to the ground. The impact made my shoulder throb, my earlier injury making itself known. I hissed, but before the wolf could take advantage, Ava’s wolf growled, leaping in and digging her claws into his throat.

His blood spattered, staining my fur. With a grunt, I rolled off him, panting.

*You didn’t have to do that*, I mind linked Ava.

She huffed. *You didn’t have to, either.*

*Of course I did*, I replied. *I’m your Alpha.*

*What’s wrong with your shoulder?* Ava asked as I stood on my feet. *Who did this?*

*Someone who is now having a much-needed vacation in the spirit world*, I replied. *Don’t worry, I’ll heal.*

“If you two are done chatting inside your brains,” Big Mac grunted, “let’s get moving.”

I turned to see the witch struggling to stand. She groaned. Both Ava and I rushed to her, and she leaned on me, using me for support.

*We should go join the others*, I mind linked to Ava.

“We should find the others before more of these Bitterfangs arrive,” Big Mac said hoarsely, as if hearing my thoughts.

*Let me help*,Ava mind linked and came closer, taking on some of Big Mac’s weight. We navigated the woods slowly, the only sound Big Mac’s groans of pain. I looked over at Ava now and then. She looked like hell. But a powerful kind of hell, actually. Her wolf’s fur was smeared with blood, disheveled. But she was strong and assured. I liked that about her. So did my wolf.

*I need to check your wound when we get to the others*, Ava mind linked the moment our eyes locked.

*It’s fine*, I said, trying to play it down.

*It’s not fine*, Ava said firmly. *Why hasn’t it fully healed yet? I’ll take care of it.*

She wasn’t going to let this go, I realized. And for some reason, that triggered a strange sensation inside me. A feeling of belonging that meant someone was keeping an eye out for me. That someone cared about me.

My Luna cared about me. She moved forward and licked my wound. The healing powers of the mate bond. Of course.

The moment was interrupted when Big Mac hissed in pain, her step faltering.

“Fuck!” the witch cursed, stumbling to the ground. I shifted into my human form immediately, and Ava followed. I reached for Big Mac, to pick her up and help her, but she swatted my hand away. “I’m fine! I can do it myself!”

Ava sighed. *This witch would rather implode than admit she needs help.*

I nodded in agreement just as Big Mac grabbed at my arm, leaning against me. Looking between us, she barked, “Well? What are you waiting for? Onward!”

Moving with her in human form was actually easier, because both Ava and I had a good grip on her. The sounds of battle were louder in the distance, which meant that we were getting nearer. Ava and I continued supporting Big Mac until we got close enough that I could smell the alliance packs fighting with the Bitterfangs.

My stomach dropped when I scented my brother’s blood.

*The fucker better not be dead.*

A second later, his wolf jumped over some bushes, running over to us. I was not going to acknowledge the relief I felt. He shifted back to human, his eyes fixed on Big Mac. “What happened?”

I glared at him. “What the fuck do you think happened? Isn’t it obvious?”

A few feet away, in the clearing, the fighting raged on.

“Take care of Big Mac,” I told Greyson. “There’s still fighting to do. Ava and I—”

A loud howl interrupted me. I looked over Greyson’s shoulder and spotted the Bitterfang wolves throwing back their heads and howling. Suddenly, all of them started retreating at once.

“Why are they leaving?” Ava asked, shocked.

What the *hell* was happening here?

**Episode 4043**

**Greyson**

“Are you all gonna keep standing here naked, making chitchat, or are we going to get moving?” Big Mac snapped.

I couldn’t tell how badly injured she was, but the fact that she was still grumpy had to be a good sign. I was relieved—if anything happened to her, my mother would be devastated. My eyes flickered to Xavier’s shoulder next, the deep gash there. I wondered how he got that. The answer arrived a moment later, when he told Ava, “The Bitterfangs ran off because they expect us to run after them—one of their wolves did that with me earlier. I ran right into an ambush.”

His words were interrupted by Knox’s wolf, who barreled over to us. With a snarl, he mind linked, *What are you doing? We should be chasing after them!*

This pain in the ass—if Xavier didn’t knock some sense into him, I would be more than happy to do it. But before I could make that statement, Xavier shifted back into his wolf and got all up into Knox’s face.

*Don’t you get it?* Xavier snarled. *They* want *us to follow them! That’s their strategy—to split us up and then overpower us. Is that what you want?*

Knox’s wolf ears lowered. He backed down just as Mace arrived.

*I agree with Xavier*, he mind linked.

I nodded, adding, *This attack could have been a way to delay and distract us from getting to the Redwood pack house.*

*You think they’ll attack the pack house?* Xavier asked, his eyes snapping to mine.

*They’ve done it before*, I replied.

The rest of the Blue Blood, Samara, and Vanguard delegations joined us in that moment, with Lucian’s large, light-silver wolf prancing around. *Aha! We must have killed or wounded a dozen of those beasts. That ought to send a message.*

Aysel sniffed. *For sure.*

Xavier growled. *The only message is that this was a complete shitshow. They split us up, we had no cohesive plan—we’re lucky we didn’t suffer any fatalities beyond Lucian’s scout.*

*We were ambushed, Xavier*, I pointed out. *We didn't have the luxury of planning or coming up with a strategy.*

Xavier huffed. *We should have predicted this—the Bitterfangs have done this before!*

I eyed him. *Are you casting the blame on someone here?*

Xavier got closer, glaring at me. *If I were to cast blame, brother, you would be—*

*Enough!* Mace snapped, stepping between us. *We can sort this out later. We need to get out of here right now.*

Xavier and I glared at each other. I moved back first. Mace was right. I nodded at him before he gestured at his pack. A moment later, he was leading them away.

*We cannot go anywhere before we finish honoring my pack member!* Lucian exclaimed.

I nodded. *Let’s work and get this done.*

Lucian nodded. He and Armin shuffled more leaves and dirt to bury the scout and turned to Xavier. He was peering at Big Mac, who held onto a naked, dirt-covered Ava. She hissed in pain. I realized that things had to be pretty bad if she had no comment on the fact that Ava was helping her.

*Big Mac’s worse than before*, I mind linked. *You’ll have to do this yourself. You still good with that?*

Xavier said nothing. He just glanced at Ava and lowered himself to the ground. They must’ve mind linked, because a moment later, I watched as Ava helped Big Mac onto Xavier’s back and then climbed up behind her. The witch looked more pained and grumpier than ever. She grumbled something about Sabine ruining her life by needing her to stay alive and deal with these werewolves.

Despite Big Mac being Big Mac, a twinge of guilt hit me—I should be the one carrying her. Not only was she a Redwood, but she was also my mom’s fiancée. Big Mac needed someone to hold onto her, though, and that had to be Ava. I wasn’t about to get into another argument with Xavier about whatever feelings of possessiveness he had about his Luna riding on my back.

Ava was Xavier’s Luna, because he was the Samara Alpha. It still felt surreal to know that that was a real, true fact.

After Xavier ran off with the rest of the Samaras, and Lucian assured me they were covering the back, I turned in the direction of the Blue Bloods. Rushing forward, I caught up with Mace quickly. Maren was on his back. Mace glanced at me, shaking his head as we ran.

*You can’t keep doing this*, he mind linked.

*You have to be more specific here*, I replied.

*Every argument you have with Xavier—whether you’re right or wrong—weakens the alliance*, Mace said. *And this time, Xavier was right.*

I stayed quiet. Mace added, *We were scattered all over the place back there, Greyson. I’m not blaming you—every Alpha was at fault here. But we need to do better, or the Bitterfangs will defeat us. Their numbers are massive.*

*That’s true*, I admitted.

*And they know strategy*, Mace continued. *It’s obvious from the way they ambushed us. So, we can’t waste any time with you and your brother arguing like a couple of pups. Your fighting could distract us, and if we’re distracted—*

*We could get killed*, I completed his sentence.

Mace’s eyes flashed. *Yeah.*

*You’re right. I’m sorry it’s come to this*. I shook my head, feeling frustrated. *But how can I make Xavier listen to me? Any time I say anything, even if it’s just a suggestion, Xavier takes it as an affront. I could tell him the sky is blue, and he’d disagree out of spite.*

Mace’s wolf huffed, and I glanced at Maren on his back. He had been going slower, so she didn’t slip off, and her eyes had been flickering between Mace and me. I was glad she couldn’t hear this conversation.

*I’m not saying Xavier’s an easy guy to talk to*, Mace said. *He’s got a chip on his shoulder the size of a mountain. That’s why I’m talking to you about this and not him.*

*Thanks*, I said dryly. *I guess.*

*You should at least try not to argue with him*, Mace said. *We still have a ways to go, and there could be more ambushes. We don’t need any of this bullshit.*

*I know, and I’ll try*, I replied.

Neither of us spoke for a moment as we moved through the forest. Then Mace said, *It’s none of my business, but I’ve heard a few concerns raised about what’s going on with Cali.*

I tensed. *What does Cali have to do with any of this? She’s not even here.*

*Nobody explained to any of us how or why Xavier became the Samara Alpha*, Mace said. *Why’d he leave the Redwood pack? And if Ava is his mate and his Luna, where do Cali and the* due destini *fit into this?*

I internally groaned. *Do we really need to go there right now?*

*It’s important if it complicates the alliance.* Mace paused. *And, honestly, our packs have been through a lot together. We just… want to understand what’s going on.*

I couldn’t blame them. I didn’t see a way out of this, other than to be honest.

*The truth is, I don’t have any answers*, I said. *I don’t fucking know what’s going on with Xavier. He’s given us some bullshit excuses for his actions, but none of it makes sense.* *I’ve tried to talk to him about it, but he keeps shutting me out*.

I was still so angry with Xavier for kissing Cali, telling her that they were done, and then making Ava his Luna. It was like he was toying with both women at once, in a twisted, fucked-up game that served nobody but his ego. I had never thought Xavier could be so cruel—at least, not toward Cali—but now, here we were.

And there was that other thing he’d said that I had tried to shove out of my head, but now it kept coming back up to the surface. How, even if Cali did choose me, the shadow of Xavier would always haunt us. That Cali’s choice wasn’t a choice at all, and I would always have to wonder if I was just Xavier’s replacement—if I was second best.

I gritted my teeth together at the notion.

*I only brought it up because it seems to be causing friction between the two of you—maybe even more than usual*, Mace said, interrupting my thoughts.

I knew Mace was right. And if he was worried about this, the others were probably feeling the same way. Or they were getting there.

*This needs to be resolved, Greyson*, Mace continued when I didn’t say anything. *Maybe you and Xavier can talk before the packs meet?*

*I’ll do my best*, I said. I meant that. *But if Xavier doesn’t cooperate again—*

*You need to try*, Mace said, cutting me off.

I swallowed hard, nodding. Fucking Xavier.

Mace looked ahead, his face severe. *The Bitterfangs’ ambushing bullshit is hard to predict. Everything would be much easier if we figured out a way to avoid that. Any ideas?*

*Not sure*, I said. *But there’s one thing I’m certain of: the pack war has begun.*

**Episode 4044**

I processed Artemis’s question.

*Do I want to have a* real *Luna mark?*

“I’ve thought about it a lot,” I admitted. “Especially being at the summit and seeing all the real Lunas.”

“What about Xavier?” Artemis asked.

I looked away. “Seeing Xavier make Ava his Luna was gut-wrenching. I… I didn’t expect it.”

Rishika frowned. “I would think it was the logical next step, though. Xavier’s with her, so—”

“He kissed me the same night,” I said, my voice cracking. “I thought there was some connection there again, but then—then he turned around and made Ava his Luna.”

Rishika’s jaw clenched. “That’s unforgivable.”

Artemis crossed her arms over her chest, huffing. “Unforgivable? The man needs to be castrated!”

I winced. “Artemis—”

“He’s a bastard,” Artemis spat. “What kind of twisted game is he playing? It’s—”

“Artemis, I still love him.”

My words landed like a grenade, and nobody spoke for a moment. My anger was laced with confusion, and in the quiet of the night, it seemed more like sadness.

“Are you really in love with him, or is it just the mate bond?” Rishika asked quietly.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You say you love him, but do you *like* him? Do you respect him? Because his behavior doesn’t have anything to do with any of that. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t see you as a person. Because if he did…”

“He wouldn’t be treating you like you’re nothing to him,” Artemis finished. Her voice had lowered, and to see all the fight fly out of her was jarring. I wiped my eyes quickly—I didn’t even realize when the tears had started falling.

Artemis sat down next to me on the bench, wrapping her arms around me. “I’m sorry he’s causing you so much pain.” She paused. “But I can also cause *him* pain, if you say the word. I have it all laid out in my head.”

I gulped. “You’ve actually spent time thinking about hurting Xavier?”

Artemis shrugged. “Rishika says I should think about things that calm me down before I go to sleep.”

*Right…*

*Where do I even BEGIN with unpacking that one?*

I decided not to.

“*Anyway*,” Rishika said, clearing her throat, “regardless of Xavier, you did a pretty good job of being the pack Luna. Were there a couple of questionable moments there? Sure—”

“What?” Artemis interrupted. “Cali made zero mistakes!”

“She agreed with you to take us to the Bitterfang tents, Artemis,” Rishika said, unimpressed. “So, I guess that was *your* fault, then?”

Artemis looked Rishika up and down before turning to me. “Do you see what I deal with? She’s lucky she’s so beautiful.”

Rishika snorted, shaking her head before adding, “The point is that, overall, Cali was a good leader during the summit. I’m sure the rest of the group feels the same way.”

Rishika’s acknowledgment made a pool of warm, positive feelings spread inside me. I welcomed them after talking about Xavier.

“I went into the summit feeling like a fraud,” I said. “But then I realized the only difference between me and the other Lunas is that my mark isn’t real. I might not have been through the official ceremony, but Greyson considers me to be his Luna. That’s what matters.”

“Have you talked more about *making* it official?” Artemis asked.

I nodded. “The problem is that nobody knows if a half-Fae can survive the ceremony. Or if the Luna mark would even work on me,” I said. “The only hope I have is that Rowena was able to become the Cobalt Luna, even though she’s a witch.”

“Rowena is a full witch, though,” Rishika pointed out. “And we still don't know what would happen to a Fae, let alone a half-Fae.”

Artemis shot Rishika a look. “We’re trying to be supportive here, *dear*.”

Rishika raised an eyebrow. “We have to accept that there’s a big risk involved here, *dear*.”

“Cali’s not going to die!” Artemis scoffed. “She’s not—”

“Let’s please not talk about me dying right now, okay?” I cut her off. “There’s too much going on at the moment for me to think about this.”

The two agreed on that, at least. When Artemis got up and stole a quick kiss from Rishika, who laughed, I felt a pang in my chest. The two of them, no matter their problems, just seemed to have it figured out. Whereas I always felt like I was in shambles.

I was pretty sure—okay, a hundred percent sure—that Greyson wanted me to officially choose him. But I didn’t feel right doing it while there were so many unanswered questions about Xavier. I didn’t want Greyson to feel like he was the default. I didn’t want to still have feelings for Xavier while being Greyson’s Luna. But even if I did make that choice, would Greyson ever accept the risk involved in making me his Luna?

*None of these thoughts help right now, Cali*, I told myself. *Especially not at this hour…*

I looked off into the woods. It was so late. I—and everyone—had been running on adrenaline. I would love to sleep, but I wanted to make sure that Greyson was safely back. I also couldn’t help but worry about Xavier’s safety, too.

*Though I probably shouldn’t, because he’s got Ava to take care of him…*

That thought sure woke me the fuck up.

It didn’t last, however, because what felt like just a few minutes later, I was leaning against Artemis’s shoulder, struggling to stay awake. I was a little ashamed that I’d nodded off a couple of times. I thought that worrying and angsting was a 24/7 job, but my body apparently disagreed.

“Okay, time for bed!” Gabriel’s voice boomed suddenly, and I jumped to attention. He strutted out of the house, clapping his hands together. “I’m here to relieve you!”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “How’s Bess doing?”

His expression shifted. Letting out a deep sigh, he said, “She’s disappointed you don’t trust her. But Mikah convinced me to give Bess an early retirement.” His eyes gleamed. “For now.”

“So, Bess is gone?” I asked carefully.

Gabriel scratched the back of his head. “Mikah says she might not be the best weapon for our situation. I disagree, but when he gets stubborn like this, there’s no way to sway him. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Rishika shook her head in disbelief. “Were you really going to use that bazooka thing in a pack war?”

“If you saw how well it works, you’d agree with me,” he told Rishika.

Rishika was ready to respond, but then Artemis grabbed her hand and said it was time for bed. As the two of them headed inside, I followed. But then I paused, eyeing Gabriel as he started doing stretches on the porch.

“Gabriel?”

He glanced at me over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Why…” I swallowed. “Why are you and Mikah staying to help us?”

He looked surprised, facing me. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“This isn’t your pack. You’re a Rogue, and Mikah is—Mikah. I hope you know I’m not expecting anything more from you.”

He chuckled. “What are you talking about? This is where the action is! I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

I took a step closer, examining his face. His cavalier attitude didn’t ring true. At least not entirely. “Is this because of Xavier?”

Gabriel’s jokiness faded. “Xavier’s been acting like a bit of a dick lately. Okay, not a bit. A lot. A giant dick. A blue whale’s dick. Have you seen how big their dicks are?”

I pressed my lips together. He sighed. “Sorry. Mikah makes me watch nature documentaries with him. It’s a lot.”

The urge to laugh and hug Gabriel hit me out of nowhere, but I contained it. He was Xavier’s friend. Not mine.

“If you’re here because of some loyalty to Xavier, I think I need to remind you that Xavier isn’t in the Redwood pack anymore. He’s a Samara now.”

It hurt to say it out loud. It must’ve shown on my face, because Gabriel put an arm around me. I ignored the way the contact made me feel, because I’d probably start crying like an idiot again.

“I heard about everything that happened,” he said seriously. “I’ve known Xavier a long time, and he’s rarely surprised me like this. Becoming the Samara Alpha and choosing Ava as his Luna…” He squeezed my arm. “I’m sorry.”

A lump formed in my throat, the kiss with Xavier popping into my head again. “I’m sorry, too.”

“You know, I really thought you were the one for him,” he muttered.

His words made me chuckle bitterly. I wiped away a tear, shaking my head. “I used to think so, too. Not anymore.”

Then Gabriel kissed the side of my head and let go of me. “Go get some rest. I’ll watch things for a while. And tell Mikah to hurry up with that coffee.”

“Thanks for the chat,” I said, taking a deep breath. I was about to turn when he gripped my hand.

“For what it’s worth,” he said, “this isn’t the Xavier I thought I knew. I’m as shocked as you are.”

I was ready to ask him if *he* had any explanations for Xavier’s behavior when the door opened.

“Here’s your coffee, you menace,” Mikah deadpanned, thrusting the cup in Gabriel’s face.

“’Bout time,” Gabriel scoffed, taking a sip. He scowled at the cup. “Did Lola make this?”

Before the two of them could start bickering again, I stepped inside. When the door closed behind me, I leaned against it, taking a deep breath. What did Gabriel mean by saying that this wasn’t the Xavier he knew?

I had been telling myself that I had to move on—to accept Xavier’s rejection. But if Gabriel, one of Xavier’s best friends, sensed that his behavior was out of character as well…

Was I right to think that there was something Xavier wasn’t telling me?

**Episode 4045**

**Xavier**

I moved through the trees with the other wolves. We’d been making good progress for the past hour or so. Ava and Big Mac were on my back, but they didn’t weigh me down. Unlike this entire situation. I was still annoyed at the other Alphas—and myself, if I was being honest. I felt like I should’ve been able to anticipate the Bitterfang attack somehow. We *all* should’ve anticipated it. We should’ve been expecting the worst, and we should’ve prepared for it.

We’d let Malakai get the jump on *four* fucking *Alphas*. It was embarrassing, and it was dangerous. We couldn’t let it happen again.

*Stop brooding*, Ava’s mind link cut through my thoughts.

I rolled my eyes. *I’m not brooding.*

*I can tell that you are—I can feel it. Try to cool off. It doesn’t do any of us any good if you’re stewing.*

I huffed. She thought she knew me so well, didn’t she? But, of course, she did.

*How’s the witch?* I asked, changing the subject.

*She’s doing all right*, Ava said, *but I’m still worried about her. She’s lost a bunch of blood, so I’m trying to keep her awake.*

*How?* I asked.

*By humming* *“She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain.”*

*Wow*, I said. *How are you still alive?*

*I don’t know*, Ava said. *I’ve received a few very strong glares…*

*Keep it up*, I said, *and just make sure she doesn’t fall off. As soon as we get to the Redwood pack house, either Torin or Kira will heal Big Mac, and the witch will live to glare another day.*

*Poetic*, Ava replied.

I snorted, shaking my head as we kept moving. Then I said, *It’s good of you to help Big Mac.*

*Of course*, Ava replied. *She helped me, too, during the fight. She’s helped me before.* She paused, and I felt like there was more coming. Sure enough, she added, *I know that you still care about the people in the Redwood pack.*

Where was she going with this? Was she going to bring up the Cali kiss again? I wasn’t in the mood to discuss it right now. Or ever again.

*I know that you care for a lot of them and that you might have burned bridges with them by becoming the Samara Alpha*, Ava said. *I see it most obviously with Greyson, but also with Jay.*

My heart started pounding at her words. I hadn’t expected her to go *there*.

*I’m aware that you made a sacrifice to be with me—to be our Alpha*,she went on. *And I hope that you can eventually mend things with those who you want to.*

I wanted to tell Ava that my brother could jump off a cliff for all I cared, but the words didn’t come out. They weren’t completely true—fully. And Ava wasn’t wrong. The entire Redwood pack seemed to hate me now. Especially Cali. By my own design, but still. She didn’t know I had sold my soul to protect her.

But that was the goal, right? Adéluce had wanted me to make Cali despise me, and it had worked. It had worked so well that it rippled down to the others, too. They saw Cali as one of them, and by wronging her, I had lost them all in the process.

Would I ever be able to restore my friendship with Jay back to how it was?

Jay had sided with Cali, and I couldn’t blame him. But I did miss him. I really could use Jay by my side through all this shit. Gabe, too, even if his solution to everything was to blow shit up. *I bet he’d love to blow Adéluce up.* But “hothead” wasn’t his only setting. He was a loyal friend, a dependable ally, and he could do something not many people could—he made me laugh.

I hadn’t laughed in so long.

I had no idea where Gabe stood with all this, though. Mikah would definitely have a problem with the way I’d treated Cali, Mr. Morals over there, and he’d be all passive aggressive about it and tell Gabe how wrong I was. Gabe didn’t have quite the same moral compass as most people, but he either liked someone, or he didn’t. And he had always liked Cali.

What the fuck was there not to like?

I brought myself back to the present.

Then I told Ava, *Thank you for saying that. But don’t worry about it. I’m not all bent out of shape because a few people are mad at me.*

The lie was so big and heavy that it made my chest actually ache. I didn’t give a fuck when people were mad at me. People didn’t have to like me, and I didn’t usually like them, anyway. But these weren’t just “people.” Jay and Gabe and Cali and even Greyson. They were…

I shook my head to clear it. They were nothing to me now. They couldn’t be. Not while Adéluce had me on strings.

Ava didn’t respond, and I was thankful for that. I didn’t want her to call me out. I didn’t have the time or desire to debate who mattered to me and who didn’t.

I kept on running, pushing myself onward. Ava’s humming and Big Mac’s huffing continued, so at least I knew the witch was alive. Maybe not alive and *well*, but pissed off enough to go on. I doubted she’d ever die, actually. She would keep on living out of spite and pettiness. Well, good for her. I respected that.

We were brought to a standstill when we reached a river. I didn’t remember encountering one when we’d come over.

*There was no river when we came here*, Mace mind linked, verbalizing my thoughts.

*The fight must have thrown us more off course than we realized*, I said.

*We have to either cross here or see if there’s another spot to cross*, Greyson said. *This looks too deep.*

That wouldn’t have been an issue if it weren’t for Big Mac and Maren, who couldn’t shift. It was a problem for Big Mac, mostly, with her injury. The witch was literal baggage here.

*Don’t talk about her like that*, a voice scolded in my head.

Cali’s voice. I could hear it so clearly—exactly what she would say and how she’d say it.

*Big Mac has saved you a million times before. She’s part of the pack, and even if you’re no longer a Redwood, you can’t deny all the things she’s done for you when you asked for it*.

My mate sounded like my conscience, and the thought of her made my stomach lurch.

*We should push upstream a bit more to see if there’s another place for us to cross*, Greyson went on.

And even though I knew he had a point here, I didn’t fucking want him to have it. Because he got Cali’s voice in his head all the time, and it wasn’t a fantasy.

*The last thing we want here is to be too slow about this and have the Bitterfangs corner us*, I countered.

*Indeed. Let’s do it here. The current isn’t strong, and it’s faster this way*, Lucian said.

Having Lucian take my side wasn’t helping my cause. Nobody respected him. But that didn’t mean that Greyson was right all the fucking time.

*I disagree*, Mace said, stepping up. Maren was on his back, looking ahead. Mace added, *It’s too deep and wide right here. We’d have to go full speed, and that would rattle Big Mac. She’s injured, and if she gets worse or falls off, it could just end up setting us back again.*

I wanted to tell Mace that if he worried about Big Mac so much, he should have Maren hold onto her. But I knew that that would be a dick move—Ava was a werewolf, and she had the physical strength to maneuver Big Mac much more easily than Maren could. Especially if we got into the water.

I glared at Mace, then at Greyson. They were becoming quite the duo, it seemed. Always agreeing on the next move. As annoying as that was, standing on the same side of an issue as the princeling would never sit right with me.

When no one said anything, Mace piped up again. *We should either go north and avoid the river altogether, or find a better place to cross. That’s it.*

*So, you agree with Greyson*, I said. It felt like I had to prove myself all the time under my brother’s watch. I fucking hated it.

Mace’s wolf huffed. *It’s not about agreeing with Greyson. It’s just what makes sense, Xavier.*

I scoffed. *Except you always agree with him, regardless of whether my point or anyone else’s also makes sense.*

*That’s bullshit*, Mace snapped. *And we don’t have the time to sit here and argue over bullshit.* He looked among us. *We need to choose one person to be in charge here. Who’s it going to be?*